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THE MAN IN THE CASE

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by

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps

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By Elizabeth Stuart Phelps

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THE MAN IN THE CASE

The
MAN IN THE CASE

by

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps

Illustrated by Henry J. Peck

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THE
MASTER-MOTIVE
OF
JESUS

ILLUSTRATIONS

A vision of her blinding all his heart and brain (*page* 34) FRONTISPIECE

"Ladies," she said, "I have come to resign my office" 88

"She received us as if she had been the queen of Heaven, sir" 124

Joan perceived Mary Caroline helping the furnace man 184

She dexterously bound the wound 196

"Here 's your mother's veil, Miss Joan" 246

The
MAN IN THE CASE

CHAPTER I

IVIN' is like cat's cradle," said Mary Caroline. "It's quite interestin' long 's there ain't a man's hand a-holdin' of the string."

Miss Dare smiled. She smiled easily and charmingly; most easily that day, for she was light at heart. It was an October day, fair of face, warm of impulse, grave of purpose, like an experienced and beautiful woman, — a day deep to the soul of it with color, and alive to the last nerve of it with tenderness. One might have said that it

was a day when the two halves of the year met before their separation; that winter clasped summer in his arms and gave her in one solemn embrace the passion of betrothal and farewell.

Miss Dare's living-room was so far a thing from the accepted suburban "parlor," that it was called a library, and, to an extent, deserved the name. For it was unpretentious, well lighted, and lined with books. The windows of this room were open — the late afternoon was so warm — and the floating leaves from the maples that arched the street flew in on the south wind; two or three struck Miss Dare on the forehead and remained on her hair like fragments of a shattered crown; one, a yellow one with carmine cheeks, fell to the bosom of her white woolen gown, and clung there: she fastened the leaf in the place

it had chosen, but shook the others off, laughing.

"Oh, but Mary Caroline! *Every* man does n't snarl. And if he does n't, just think how splendidly he holds the game! His hands don't shake — nor scratch — and they 're so — big"—

"The bigger they be, the wuss they snarl," said Mary Caroline obstinately. "It 's the natur' of the critter. I hain't got no use for 'em, nor you neither. Thanks be to mercy there ain't none of 'em 'round *us*, clutterin' us up with late dinners, fussin' over ice in the grapes, and takin' the seeds out of their oranges same as they was babies to get stuck in their throats. They 're a passel of sp'iled boys — men-folks; they had n't orter be let loose in the same world with women to sp'ile

'em. 'T ain't fair play, not to neither party."

"Mary Caroline," said Miss Dare sweetly, "I wonder what you are going to give me for supper?"

Mary Caroline felt that she and the subject were dismissed with a consideration equaled only by its diplomacy. Nothing in the range of human imagination (so far as this mysterious faculty had been granted to her) — nothing was too much for Mary Caroline to do for Joan Dare. The old servant stooped heavily and picked up the leaves which were littering the floor at Miss Dare's feet.

"There 's a stitch outen you," she said. "I must run you up."

She held the hem of the white gown a moment, letting it go reluctantly; she seemed to fondle it; her plain,

middle-aged face flushed with the motion of stooping, and she limped away as if the effort of the action had hurt her somewhere. But Mary Caroline never "complained" to her mistress.

Miss Dare had started to close the open window, and to reach the shade which had sprung to the top; thus she had one of the beautiful poses of the eternal feminine — that of the uplifted arms; an attitude significant at once of grace and strength, of appeal and support.

Joan had one of the faces of which we say, "It is strong," and afterwards, "It is sweet." She had passed her first youth, and reached the age when women can be most miserable or most happy; some cynics have said, when women can love most. Her form and

coloring had the ripeness and richness of her thirty-fifth year; her brown eye was warm, and her motions were pliant, and rather dependent than assertive, but her head was well poised, and about her mouth, despite its swift smile and the charming way of it, were the lines of emotion outlived, and suffering uncommunicated.

As she stood in this position, the electric car came crying up the suburban street, and whirred through the maple arch that covered it; the prosaic outlines of the car were unnaturally picturesque, seeming a shallop of green upon a sea of fire.

The passengers were coming from the business train. Many of them were walking, and one who at that moment passed the house turned and looked at it, and her. His feet lagged; he stood

for a moment with raised hat, and then came up the avenue. This was something of a distance, for Miss Dare's house stood well back from the street in a little estate of several acres, conspicuous in the suburb of Mapleleaf for its relative size, and its obstinate refusal to be butchered into corner lots.

Joan's arms dropped. Her visitor raised his with the impulse of a man who would have embraced the atmosphere which surrounded her, but he recalled himself.

"Are you coming in?" she asked, with a pretty, upward motion of the head that she had when she was happy.

"This evening — yes. That is, if I may? Would you like to have me?"

"Try it and see!" said Joan.

Her voice laughed, her eyes laughed, her fluttering color laughed. It was now full sunset, and the eye of the West, looking through the lens of maple fire, seemed, like an artist's, to select her. She was embossed upon light, embodied of light, she pulsated light. She was brilliant and vibrant. She stood confident, yet gentle, an eidolon of joy untried but trusted. He who had awakened this exquisite phase of her stood with his head uncovered before it, as one does before a great picture or a statue; he reflected in his own appearance something of the splendor of hers. She retreated from him, she could not have told why, and melted from his advancing eyes within the room. When he had gone, she moved about restlessly, and in a few moments Mary Caroline heard her singing in

the garden behind the house. Her dog was with her, barking ecstatically.

"I'd like to go 'n set somewheres and sing myself," observed Mary Caroline, as she cleared the supper table. "It 's Friday night. They say they do miss my alto when I ain't at meetin'."

"Why, go, by all means!" cried Miss Dare with cordiality so quick that Mary Caroline gave her mistress a shrewd and sober glance; but it was not accompanied by comment. Mary Caroline knew her limitations.

When Mary Caroline came to say that she was starting for the prayer-meeting, Miss Dare was lighting a little fire in the grate. The dog was with her — a very large collie, old, spoiled, and a misanthrope. His big head was on her shoulder, and both his paws were

around her neck, closed there with an assurance which, however regrettable, was plainly an accepted fact in the family history.

"That critter don't know he ain't a lap-dog," said Mary Caroline scornfully. "He hain't never been learnt nothin' to the contrary. Look a' that there dress of yourn!"

"O Martin *Lu*ther!" cried Miss Dare. "It 's *white!*"

She pushed the dog down, but quite gently, and Mary Caroline brushed from a spotless serge lap an imaginary print of Martin Luther's front paw. As she did so, she asked outright: —

"Warn't that Douglas Ray I heerd before supper?"

"Mr. Ray was here, yes," replied Miss Dare, in a tone with which Mary Caroline never parleyed. The lady rose

as she spoke, and mistress and maid regarded each other. The eye of each was firm, but significant; that of the maid was the first to waver. Mary Caroline sighed.

"Would you mind tyin' my veil for me?" she asked humbly. "I can't do it in kid gloves, let alone corsets."

"Why, of course!" said Joan.

She arranged the bit of dotted lace deftly over Mary Caroline's square forehead, high cheek bones, and hat quite in the mode.

"It 's very becoming to you," she said kindly.

All her life Joan remembered the look of Mary Caroline's face, softened by the lace, upturned and patient, lifted for that moment from its daily descent into drudgery sublimated by its worship of herself.

"Go," she said. "Have a good time —and sing alto."

She put out her hand, why, she could hardly have said; Mary Caroline laid hers in it timidly, and the two women parted for the evening.

Joan had not been long alone when Martin Luther, vociferating language which would not have been admitted at the Friday evening meeting, pushed, limping, to the front door. Joan opened it, with a pretty, expectant color. But it was a woman who stood in the vestibule — a lady — one of the neighbors, Miss Dare's oldest friend in Mapleleaf. Joan held out both hands: –

"Annie Hammerton! Come right in!"

"Going to meeting?" asked the

neighbor. "I did n't know but you'd like company. It 's rather dark."

"You never forget me. You always remember," said Joan slowly. "No, I 'm not going to-night, Annie. Mary Caroline has gone. Martin Luther and I are playing heretic."

She laughed, and thanked her friend, and the two kissed, as women do, for no particular reason, and Mrs. Hammerton went away. Joan watched her slight outlines — she was a little woman — sliding into shadow among the firs and oaks of the avenue.

"Wait! I'll hold a light for you. It looks so dark out under those trees. What a pretty shade your fall suit is! Call back, and let me know when you 're safely down, won't you? All right? Good-by, Annie, good-by."

Joan had caught up a hall candle-

stick, whose long white candle she lighted with the quickness characteristic of all her motions. She held it high above her head; her white sleeve fell away from her wrist and forearm; her face and figure were revealed more softly than vividly; she swayed on the threshold, standing between brightness and blackness; a step would have taken her into either. Then her old friend's voice came back, cheerfully: —

"All right, Joan! Good-by."

Joan stood smiling and shining.

"I have always thought," said a voice from the dark, quite near her, "that the most picturesque thing a woman can hold is a candle. No, don't stir! Pray stay just as you are till I get there. You won't shut *me* out, will you?"

"I don't know," said Joan, setting

the tall brass candlestick down slowly upon the little hall table. "I can't possibly say what I shall do. I seldom can."

"On the contrary," replied Douglas Ray, "you are a level-headed woman. You are destitute of caprice. But it would n't matter much. I should have the trouble of getting in the window, that 's all. I am coming, you know, anyhow."

He stepped in, laughing, and shut the heavy door. She watched the back of his well-shaped head and shoulders while he was locking the door. Martin Luther greeted him, but sardonically, and returned to the living-room, where he dozed heavily on the rug, occupying the whole of it, with the apparent purpose of keeping the visitor away from the fire.

It now occurred to Miss Dare — she had not thought of it before — that she was alone in the house with Douglas Ray. Something in this simple circumstance embarrassed her. Was it the fact that he was locking the door? As if he belonged there. Or the masterful ease with which he tossed his coat and hat upon the hall sofa? As if it were his sofa. Or was it — what ailed the man? He had loved her for a good while; she knew his eyes as Andromeda knew the eyes of Perseus. But this was a Perseus repelled. She had preferred her dragons, whatever they were, to his advancing passion. Only now, perhaps scarcely for a month's span, or a week's, — who could say? had she seemed to cease to distance him. The man, who had studied every letter of her nature with the scholarship of a determined

and undiverted love, sprang towards her now, more like a captor than a rescuer. He perceived that if his hour had not come, it never would; and that he definitely purposed to make the most of it, she felt with the poignant emotion, half of pain and half of pleasure, with which a delicate woman awaits the expression of a not unwelcome love.

As definitely she had purposed to defer the psychological moment; to parry and feint, to give herself time, perhaps to give him trouble; to elude him and perplex him; to see if she could discourage him—why, she knew, and yet she did not know. Experience and instinct warred within her. She was confused by a prelude which did not preface the music of her feelings.

She began at once, when they had

sat down before the fire — more strictly speaking, when they had sat down before Martin Luther — to talk of anything, of everything, and anyhow. She started in on the widest subject she could grapple — afterwards she could not have told what; but swerved abruptly to the personal ground upon which the wisest of women are most at ease. She chatted about his business affairs comfortably, as if she understood them. Ray was an architect; he used to say that his calling was a cross between an art and a profession, perhaps, rather, an art and an industry. He had something at once of the mechanical precision and chastened imagination necessary to his occupation, and developed by it. Besides, he had Scotch blood in him. He listened to Joan that evening in dense, almost obstinate

silence. After a while she observed that she was doing all the talking, so drew breath, and stopped short.

"Well?" he said quietly. "Why don't you go on?"

"But you are not saying anything. You do not answer me."

"Because I did not come here to-night to talk politics, either national or parochial, nor even to discuss my own professional affairs, however important, if true, they may be — no, nor Browning, nor the Eastern Wars, nor — what was it? the attitude of Boston women toward Buddhism?"

"How would Martin Luther do?" asked Joan contritely.

"Life is not long enough for that subject."

"Would Mary Caroline suit you any better?"

"At least she is straightforward and sincere," replied Ray, with the Scotch look about his mouth.

"Now you are not kind! Now you wrong me!" cried Joan quivering.

"God forbid!" said Douglas Ray.

"I don't think God has anything to do with it!" blazed Joan. "Things are as people are. Life is what we make life. It 's not fair play to go packing everything off on God — the foolish things we do, and the wrong ones — especially the wrong ones, the deeds that *have* to have consequences — the moral hooks that draw other people down. If a man forges a check, one would suppose that Providence should be arrested for it. It 's not God's affair how you treat me, or I treat you, or what comes of it, now or — or any time."

"Joan," said the Scotchman, "I did not come for us to talk — not to-night — like this."

Joan was sitting in the Morris chair before the grate; the fire was fluttering as a fire will, when it does not know whether to live or die; what light it gave expressed her, listening; her position had a certain curve like that of an ear. Martin Luther had got up laboriously, and put his head in the collie attitude upon her knee. Her fingers went to his forehead instinctively, but her eyes sought the fire, which plainly she did not see. It was impossible for Ray to interpret her expression or her manner. Stung by a sudden sense of helplessness before the mystery of womanhood which overtakes every sensitive man in the crisis of pursuit, he said, between his teeth:

"Put that dog out of the room. I came here to ask you to be my wife, and I don't want him listening!"

Joan gasped. He thought for a moment that he had said the fatal thing, and thrown his last chance. He went whiter than she, when, suddenly, she lifted her hands above her head, and so sat without a word. It was a whimsical gesture as if she surrendered, for her life, to one who threatened it. He took two steps towards her.

"Go, Martin Luther," said Joan, gently. "Go away, dear. Mr. Ray does n't want you."

"I want you!" cried the lover, "you — *you!* Nothing else, Joan, in all the world. You 've had your hour, my dear. Now mine has come."

Martin Luther, with hanging head and tail dejected, had lumbered obedi-

ently (for he was a dog) out of the room and into the hall. Beyond the threshold, being a dog, he turned and looked. And when he saw, Martin Luther sighed.

Joan did not remember Martin Luther. She had forgotten the world and all that was therein. She had neither memory nor forecast. Nothing approached her consciousness except the rapture of soul and sense into whose prison she had been captured. It seemed to her like a cell in which she and Douglas had been barred. Walls and bolts of space and feeling isolated them from the Universe, and locked them to each other.

She had not thought it would be like this — she had not indeed meant it to be like this. Was it then of no consequence what a woman meant? or

whether she meant anything at all? She had dreamed of a gradual surrender, a slow and sure delight, delicate concessions and explanations, subtle advances and retreats, perhaps of confidences, for which he had given her no opportunity; she had expected emotion and experience, for which he had allowed her no time. In point of fact, the man had simply taken her two hands and put them around his neck.

The first thing that he kissed was the leaf upon her bosom — the gold-colored one with the carmine cheeks. But when he found her lips, he thought: "I have got me a woman from the Lord." And he could have knelt before her white feet. But she withheld him, and she came to him like any simple, impulsive woman who had not

been difficult to win. So then he was astonished that he had been distanced by her so long, or that he had been afraid to woo her. Yet never had he feared her as he did at that moment, but it was the holy fear that a man has of the love of a good woman when first he perceives how great a thing it is.

"How long have you cared — like this?" he demanded. But she shook her head.

"If you had lifted a lash, I would have followed your least whim, — yes, to the ends of the earth. I would have sheltered you from everything — every care — the hurts of living. Oh, we have lost all this time! Why did you" —

But she pleaded with him again: "Do not ask me! I do not know how to explain it to you — the way I felt.

I can only tell you — won't that do? — the way I feel."

"We are in heaven," said the Scotchman. "You shall exercise its rights. And so, Joan, so shall I."

He took her to his heart as if she had been a nestling girl, and lifted her to the tall chair where they sat clasped, but reverent, before the fading fire. At first they were mute with their happiness, using only its sign language. But presently they began to grope for each other with blind speech — broken phrases, isolated words, apostrophes of endearment; and so, slowly they found their way back to the human vocabulary which forms outside of ecstasy, and relates the pitiable remainder of the world where sweet and terrible new love is not, or has forgotten that it ever was, to the remote construction of life.

They spoke of all the pent-up things that they had never had the right to speak of before — how much they cared, and how long they had felt thus, or so, why they had done or had omitted to do this or that, why he had been stern on such a day, or she had been cold upon such another. They spoke of their ties and conditions which were outside the fact of loving each other, and yet so mysteriously and sacredly related to it; they spoke of their families and friendships and circumstances. Of hers, in fact, he had much to learn, for he had been a silent, incurious suburban, having more the habits of the town than of the country; with what was called the society of Mapleleaf, he had troubled himself as little as possible, and in its neighborhood chat he was untaught. In truth, they were two

rather lonely people, and had swung towards each other as if they had been the only stars in their firmament. He told of his parents who were living, and she of hers, who were dead, and he told her eagerly and boyishly how his would take the place of hers, and be to her, for the love they would have of her, the renewal of what she had lost.

"My mother will come from Glasgow to see you," he said. "She has always wanted a daughter. She never had one. And my only brother died. It is almost the same as being an only child — like you."

Joan did not answer, but clung to him, sighing, as if, he thought, she was sorry for his outlived, distant sorrow; and it seemed at that moment almost an actual happiness to him for the sweetness of sharing it with her.

Then they spoke of themselves again, and of their love, and all other persons and feelings fled away from before them and it, as weak creatures in a forest flee before the trampling of strong ones in the underglades. And so, each taking courage from the other, they came to speak about their marriage, for suddenly it seemed to them that they had lost a hundred lifetimes in missing each other until now, and that fate owed them incredible compensations which they must demand at sight.

Ray was prepared to beleaguer her in this respect, thinking that she would distance him and deny him, and that he must fall back upon tactics and a siege. But she, who had evaded him for three years, and held herself beyond his power to gain, gave herself now so royally that he was half-suffocated with

his good fortune, as one is, who, turning a sudden corner, finds that a redolent, resinous, powerful wind from the South is taking his breath.

"You are very woman of very woman!" cried the man.

"When you wish," said Joan, "I will be your wife."

The fire was now gone to embers in the grate, and Martin Luther, in bitterness of soul, was sleeping sonorously upon the landing of the thickly-carpeted hall stairs.

The prayer-meeting was over. Mary Caroline, having sung alto in all the hymns, had come home in a state of mind and heart which she took to be one of a deeply religious character. Mary Caroline hurried in to share the pleasures of the evening with her mis-

tress, but, hearing a ripple of low voices succeeded by ominous and mystical silences, Mary Caroline had turned and gone gloomily upstairs. Who can say what comfort it gave Mary Caroline under the anguish of the moment that she should take the front stairs? Perhaps one must be accustomed to back stairs to understand. At all events, she stumbled on the landing, and stepped on Martin Luther's tail, and Martin Luther remonstrated without reserve. Martin Luther had a well-cultivated tenor howl, which, Mary Caroline said, was a loss to the choir.

Then Joan, blushing beautifully, opened the door that was ajar, and called: —

"Had a good time, Mary Caroline?" in a voice which was such a cataract of delight that it scattered and

spattered joy-drops over poor Mary Caroline shrinking out of sight in the dark at the top of the stairs.

"I hain't ben to a whist-party," replied Mary Caroline slowly. She passed on and up to bed without looking back, which delayed her a pang or two of those that were in store for her. But Joan could not think about Mary Caroline. She crept back into her paradise with the docility of one who had already formed the habit of happiness.

Now and then she would take some of the little frights of joy and retreat from him and withhold herself, and try to argue with him and with herself, and with their ecstasy, but only to plunge into the garden of it again.

With her cheek against his cheek she breathed: —

"Oh, I am afraid — are n't you? — to be so happy?"

But the lover laughed.

"I am not afraid of anything in the heavens above, or earth beneath, or in hell that is under the earth. Nothing *can* happen that can take you from me now."

They clung and were silent, and then they talked and clasped, and while they kissed and vowed, they took no note of time, and the tall old clock in the hall struck twelve times before they knew that it had struck at all. At that he left her, and she went to the door with him, and when they opened it, a spatter of rain smote them in the face. The southerly weather was quite gone; an east wind had brought a storm upon its back, and all the trees on the avenue were groaning and tossing their arms.

"Light the candle, won't you?" said Ray, making a mock of the dark. "I can't see a step before me. There! Hold it higher, please, — so. Stand awhile, my beautiful. I wish to look at you."

This she did with a pretty obedience, and he went away with that vision of her blinding all his heart and brain — she with the candle held high above her head, standing sweet and docile to his will, yet tall as a queen, with that upward motion of her chin, and splendid as the Angel Joy.

She stood a little at one side of the step, and the candle gave her a rich back-ground — the panels of the heavy door, and the old brass knocker, and knob, with its large plate. She recalled to Ray, whose imagination had the scriptural tendency of his nationality, a

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HE WENT AWAY WITH A VISION OF HER BLINDING ALL HIS HEART AND BRAIN

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picture he had seen of a woman searching for the piece of silver that she had lost. The knocker seemed to peer over her shoulder at him. It was something of a curio, the knocker; much carved, always well-polished, and so explicit to the eye. It carried the head of a fate which had a ring in its mouth, and therefore could not speak. It was not a cheerful, perhaps not wholly a hospitable knocker, but Joan had grown up with it, and did not mind it. Indeed, the sober thing seemed to laugh behind her at Ray as he looked back from under the wet trees; as if nothing could come near Joan and not rejoice for the delight of her that night.

Then she called down into the dark, but very softly, as she had called to the woman neighbor: —

"All right? Good-night — good-by."

And he called back —

"Good-night — good-by — good-by."

So she shut the door and locked it, and came back and sat down alone in the tall chair. She could not go to sleep for very joy, but stayed in the empty room, with Martin Luther. At her foot she felt the crumple of a leaf which she picked up, and was going to toss it in the grate, but she saw that it was the yellow leaf with the carmine cheeks, that his lips had touched upon her bosom.

"It holds his first kiss," she thought, "I shall keep it — till I take his last."

She crossed the room to lock it in an old Sheraton desk that was her father's, her shadow following her across the

drawn shades, sliding from window to window of the large room. When she turned to come back the knocker on the front door lifted and fell with a soft thud. After a hesitant pause it lifted again, then with definite urgency rose and fell once more.

Martin Luther waked, roaring, and sprang. A little disturbed, but not distinctly frightened, Joan followed the big dog to the locked door. It was now storming brutally, but, through the rage of wind and wet, Joan heard — spoken quite plainly — her own name.

"Who are you?" she asked courageously. "Who is it speaks to me?"

"Joan!" entreated the voice from without. "For God's sake open the door!"

Staggering and groping, Joan reached the knob of the door; it moved in her

shaking fingers; the bolt slid; the key turned; the chain, which was added to the protections of the house at night, tautened as the door swung in.

"Joan?" repeated the voice from the storm, "*Joan!*" The collie had now ceased to growl; every hair of him was alert, significant, but not belligerent; he pushed his nose, and then his paws, through the space above the chain.

With a grip at the heart such as kills the weak, and weakens the strong, Joan saw that the dog's tail began to swish — first slowly, then rapidly against the wall.

CHAPTER II

HEN Mary Caroline came downstairs next morning she found Miss Dare there before her. This was an extraordinary circumstance, for the maid had spoiled the mistress, who breakfasted anyhow or nohow, in bed or out of it, at any hour that suited the lady's fancy. Joan, in fact, was as free of household responsibilities as if she had been Mary Caroline's boarder.

"I have been trying to start the kitchen fire," explained Miss Dare, without looking around.

"The kitchen *fire!*" shot Mary

Caroline. "Whatever in the name of thanks be to Mercy should *you* have to do with kitchen fires?"

"I thought I'd better learn," replied Joan dully.

"I'd sooner teach a chipmunk," suggested Mary Caroline. "It would be a sight easier."

She took the poker hotly from Miss Dare; who now raised her head, shrinking slightly as one does who meets his friend for the first time after the experience of some disfiguring disorder — then boldly hurrying on the dreaded moment, she turned her face quickly and fully towards her old servant.

Mary Caroline dropped the poker, which fell red-hot upon Joan's gray dress and bit a hole in it. The sickly smell of the burnt woolen filled the kitchen. Neither of the women

spoke until Mary Caroline said, "*God A'mighty!*"

"I have n't slept very well," observed Miss Dare slowly. "You may bring me some coffee and — something. After breakfast I" —

She put her hand to her head confusedly. Ashen and carven, a blasted face looked upon Mary Caroline. Joan stood like a tree smitten by lightning from heaven in a storm that had hit nothing else. She was scorched to the roots; every leaf of her blackened, each twig of her dead. She had the aspect of the primeval things which accept their fate without a weak and weakening protest. She did not writhe. But the old servant who loved her did. Mary Caroline uttered herself as if a surgeon, without anesthesia, were moving a saw through her flesh.

"Please don't," protested Joan faintly. "Don't mind it so, Mary Caroline. After breakfast I will—yes, after breakfast I will speak with you."

Mary Caroline, who had the tongue of a torrential talker, suddenly dammed it. Something of the dumbness of her mistress extended itself to her; a little, too, of the dignity. She received Joan's rebuff without reply, and cooked her breakfast silently. This was ordered upstairs, and Mary Caroline found Miss Dare fully dressed, lying straight and still on the bed, with her smooth hair dark against the pillow.

"I will bring the tray down myself," said Miss Dare thoughtfully. She added a word or two about wanting to rest, but glanced at her breakfast with the eye of one who did not see it. Mary Caroline was pathetically pleased to

find when the tray came down that the meal had been eaten heartily after all. As soon as the dishes were washed, Mary Caroline put on a clean apron and came into the library. It was still raining, and the windows of the large room were dripping and dreary. A southeast gale lasts twelve hours, and this one lacked yet several of its abrupt death. Miss Dare was in the Morris chair. Mary Caroline, without being invited to do so, took a seat on the sofa, and folded her red hands upon her white apron. She was the first to speak.

"Well?" she said. "Here I be."

"Mary Caroline," replied her mistress, without looking at her, "I have something painful — very painful — to say to you."

"Out with it, then!" said Mary Caroline, stiffening.

"I find it — hard," parleyed Joan.

"Has that feller been a' hurtin' of your feelin's?" demanded Mary Caroline, with ominous calm.

"If you mean Mr. Ray" —

"Because ef it 's *him* — ef he 's dars't to — hain't thrown you over, has he?"

A pale smile answered this half-strangled outburst.

"Because ef he had," observed Mary Caroline, "I 'd kill him; that 's all. I know how, too. I 'd slice him the way I do corn-beef."

"We will leave Mr. Ray out of the conversation, Mary Caroline. He has no connection with the subject about which I have sent for you to talk with me. It is quite another matter upon which I have — to speak."

"I ain't so sure of that," retorted Mary Caroline obstinately. "I 'll bet

the critter 's to blame for it somehow. Men-folks always *be* to blame for the sorrers of women-folks. It 's the nater of 'em. But there! If you 're sot on it, dearie, *I* won't stand in the way."

Mary Caroline, overcome with her own magnanimity, seemed to break like a strong crockery bowl, and cracked into shrill crying.

"I 'll make the best on 't, may the Lord have mercy on his sinful soul! Have the feller hold the cat's-cradle ef you find it more inter*es*tin' than you do livin' alone along of me. Don't you bother your poor head, Miss Joan. I 'll put up with the critter someways or nuther. Seein' you ask it of me, I swear I will!" —

"But," interrupted Miss Dare feebly, "I am not asking anything of the kind of you. I am asking something a great

deal harder than that." Joan paused and panted.

"I am asking you, Mary Caroline, to leave my service."

Mary Caroline clapped her hand to her ear; like one dashed deaf by the detonation of a cannon.

"*Marm?*"

"Alas — yes. Dear Mary Caroline! Yes."

"*Me?*"

Joan nodded silently.

"*Me* leave *you?* Us that has been together — through everything — for eighteen year" —

Miss Dare leaned her head back upon the Morris chair. She made no reply, and her silence affected Mary Caroline more powerfully than any speech or language within the etymology of the situation could have done.

She wrung her gnarled hands and thrust them out before her, as if they had been facts.

"Look!" she said. "How long they 've done for you!"

Then the old servant sank upon her knees, and uttered these pathetic words: —

"I *will* put ice in his grape-fruit! I won't never say a word about them late dinners. I 'll take the seeds outen his oranges; I 'll do up his outin' shirts— his bosom, if you say so, an' never chirp."

But Joan sat perfectly still. Mary Caroline rose from her knees laboriously. Her cheeks and lips were now as blanched as Miss Dare's own.

"Mean this, do you?"

Joan looked up stolidly; scarcely a pulse of expression throbbed across her

face. Mary Caroline began to untie her apron and to roll down her sleeves. She started for the door. Joan moved her dry lips.

"Where are you going?"

"I 'm goin' for one o' them nervous doctors. You 've gone stark, starin' crazy. Some on 'em had orter see to you right away."

Joan smiled — she could not help it, even then, and even there — but it would have been easier to see her weep.

"Mary Caroline," she said distinctly, "if you bring any one to the house you will arouse my deep displeasure. Otherwise we shall part the friends — the dear friends — that we have been so long. I am quite myself, and I understand perfectly what I am doing."

Now Mary Caroline received the

arrow full in the throat. It was as if she made one fierce effort to pull it out.

"I won't go!" she said, standing still in the middle of the room.

"Not if I *ask* you to, Mary Caroline?"

"God A'mighty!" repeated Mary Caroline. She turned her head, and locked her hands upon her neck; as if she were wounded in the jugular.

"Who 's a comin' in my place?"

"No one — nobody — no person."

"He ain't turnin' me out for no darky butler? Nor no heathen Chinees? Maybe he fancies them Amenyuns goin' to evenin' schools four miles off an' can't understand no more English than a woodchuck atop of Greenland's Icy Mountains. You can tell him he 's welcome to 'em."

"I can only repeat," returned Miss

Dare faintly, "that Mr. Ray has nothing whatever to do with the matter. My reasons for this step are my own. I cannot explain them to you. I wish I could. I can only ask you — without any questions — to leave my house, and me."

"When?" cried Mary Caroline wildly. She began to tremble.

"To-day," replied Miss Dare.

Mary Caroline tottered to the door.

"You can go to your sister's, can't you?" pleaded the mistress. "I shall continue to pay your wages. I shall pay you just the same as usual, and your board for a year — two years — three — five — until I ask you to come back to me: if I ever do."

"What do you take me for?" groaned Mary Caroline. "I'd starve first. No, I thank you, Miss Dare — not so much

as my week's notice. I'll pack up and go to-night. I'll send Dexter for my trunk come Monday. Ken I stay long enough to clean up my kitchen 'n pantries an' do my Saturday's cookin'?"

Joan turned her face away. It lay upon the cushion of the tall chair like a medallion of mystery carved with the chisel of pain. Mary Caroline stood a moment looking at it, and then she shut the door.

The day passed as days do when there is death in the household; or partings harder than death. The two women exchanged but few words, and those of a quiet character. Miss Dare was acutely restless, and wandered about the house to no visible end, for no obvious reason. Mary Caroline heard her in the attic, in the guest rooms, upstairs and down. Once she came upon

her suddenly, in the upper hall, standing still and looking straight at nothing.

"Why are you here?" asked Joan sternly, and poor Mary Caroline shrank and fled. When she got downstairs she flung on a shawl to get out and find a "nervous doctor;" but her purpose wasted before the prospect of Miss Dare's displeasure.

"If she only had some folks," thought Mary Caroline. She enumerated Joan's departed relatives with that sense of her own helplessness which only an old servant who stands in stead of family relationships to a willful and worshiped mistress can experience.

"Father 'n mother gone — Harum dead — and her aunt Mari'. Her uncle Amos travelin' in some heathen nation. Nobody left the name of her but them Californy cousins — and she the way

she is. It doos seem as if this here was more 'n one hired girl had orter tackle."

"I've set three loaves o' white and one o' graham," said Mary Caroline at dinner time. "I've roasted a couple of fowls an' I'm bilin' a ham. There's four pies 'n a bowl o' doughnuts. That had orter keep ye till her that comes after me — let alone it bein' a him — gets round to knowin' where anything is."

"Nobody is coming after you," replied Miss Dare. "It won't hurt me to do a little work myself."

"You pore creeter!" murmured Mary Caroline. "You pore, disluded, misfortnit creeter! — I'd like to see ye do it," she added grimly. "Would n't shet the door in my face if I should make a party call some day, would ye?

I'll bring a card-case and ring the front bell."

"I should prefer — I am sorry to say it, Mary Caroline — that you did not come."

At this mortal shot Mary Caroline gave up the field. Without a struggle she surrendered to her fate. For the remainder of the day she met it with a dignity not surpassed by that of her mistress. She asked no question, she had no replies. Joan felt that she was treated with the reserved forbearance and uncandid silence which one extends to a deranged person not legally under surveillance. The position of the two towards each other had now begun to grow so unnatural that the pangs of parting were, somehow, mysteriously eased. For the rest of the time — it was now but a few

hours — that they remained together, neither affected the mask of words; yet it seemed to the maid that her mistress nervously watched the clock, and wished them fewer. Mary Caroline went about her work in massive silence. She scrubbed and swept, she baked and dusted, she washed and ironed, she packed and wept. With the steel muscle and the passionate devotion of the old-fashioned servant, she crushed the labors of a week into the span of a day.

At five o'clock she came into the library to say good-by.

The southeasterly, having run its twelve hours' span of life, had gnashed itself out at noon, and the afternoon had been brilliant, and rather cool. The wind had veered now to the north, and the trees on the avenue were bend-

ing the other way: as if the burdens on their shoulders had been shifted. The drops still strolled down the window-panes, one seeking the other and multiplying slowly. Miss Dare was watching them without seeing them when Mary Caroline entered the room suddenly, in her best clothes and fashionable hat, with the veil of spotted lace. Her face was disfigured by crying, but her eyes were now quite dry. Her high cheek-bones were hectic.

"I 've cleaned the back stairs," she began, "and the cellar and the attic, an' all my closets. My room is all done up. No Amenyun won't find a speck nowhere. I 've washed ye an' ironed ye all I could an' I 've swep' up everywhere only that sewin' room with the extry silver we keep locked. I could n't find the key. I 've left a list

of the forks and spoons for that there darky butler. I've set the supper-table for ye. Dexter he'll git my trunk come Monday. It's strapped, an' I brought it down the back stairs — he's such a spindlin' critter."

Mary Caroline paused. Both women had become very pale. Neither seemed able to utter the word for which both were waiting.

"You 'n me 've lived together for eighteen years," said Mary Caroline at last. "Death nor trouble hain't parted us, nor wuss 'n death. Whatever 's a doin' of it now, or whysomever, or whichsomever 's in store for ye — Miss Joan, you remember thar I be."

"I will remember," said Joan. "Mary Caroline? If it should happen that I should be blamed for parting with you or for anything — I could n't

expect you, I know, to feel the same to me?"

She spoke somewhat piteously; it was the first symptom of weakness that had escaped her.

"Death 'n hell will give up the dead as is in them," solemnly answered Mary Caroline, "before I give up feelin' the way I 've always felt to you."

Joan held out her shaking hand. But Mary Caroline did not take it. Instead, she threw her arms around Miss Dare's neck, and kissed her, for the first time in their lives.

"Oh, my dear!" she sobbed, "my dear! my dear!"

When Joan lifted her face, Mary Caroline was walking down the avenue with her little bag in her hand. She did not turn her head. Martin Luther

followed her, with a busy tail; he thought he was going to the post-office.

But Mary Caroline sent him back. He came dejectedly, and did not trouble himself to seek his mistress, whom he seemed to have forgotten. Joan sat alone in the silent house. She could hear her own heart-beats.

CHAPTER III

OUGLAS RAY came out from his office a little later than usual that day. He did not get his Saturday afternoons "off," like the salesmen and book-keepers, his neighbors in Mapleleaf. In the professions a man is his own task-master, therefore unindulged. Ray was industrious, ambitious, and successful; hence, at times, mercilessly overworked.

"When I see these fellows parading the streets for eight hours' work," said the architect, "I 'd like to tell them how many of us are lucky to get off at eighteen."

It was nearer six than five o'clock when he passed Miss Dare's house on his way from the train. It was not yet dark, and he looked for some sign or trace of her. He was disappointed to find neither. Only the hall was lighted, and the shades in the library were drawn. He hurried his dinner, and got to her before seven. The gas in the house was now turned on as usual. He did not ring, but lifted the knocker decidedly. The fate with the ring in its mouth responded. She answered the summons herself; the light was behind her, and her face presented itself to him only in its values, like those of a darkened statue. She still wore the gray dress that she had put on that morning, but at first he did not notice the lack of splendor in whose enhancement he had seen her last, nor perceive

that, whereas he had parted from a glorified being, the allegory of joy, the poem of hope, he was received by a dulled and patient woman. It was enough for him at first to touch her — living, loving, warm, and pliant — his. She lay in his arms with a certain desperate helplessness not characteristic of Joan. Had love wrought upon her already one of the swift and mysterious miracles which it is said sometimes to work upon the natures of the strongest, who are the tenderest of women? She sank against him like any little feminine creature, as if she had within her no more any power to exist outside of himself; as if she found herself deprived of thought and action, or the capability for either; as if she put him forever between herself and the stress of life — yielding its elec-

tions and its struggles to him, for very love.

He drew her into the large, empty room. The fire was not lighted in the grate, and a sort of cheerlessness which he could not define struck his sensibilities coldly. He turned to the tall chair in which they had sat, rapturous, last night. Suddenly it seemed to him a long time ago, and he wished, he could not have told why, that he had not suffered so great a space between the first and the next draughts of joy, whose brimming goblet was at his lips.

"People call twenty-four hours a day!" he began. "Four and twenty centuries have gone into this one. I wanted to come in this morning. I tried to run out at luncheon. I tried to —

"Love! Lift your face. No? — Then I shall do it for you, Joan."

He turned it gently upon his arm where she had hidden it, and so brought it forcibly to the solitary gaslight burning above his head. Then the same solemn word that had expressed the horror of the old servant leaped to the lips of the lover.

"God!" he said, "my God!"

Joan had released herself from his arms, and stood stolidly. Up to this moment she had not spoken. The figure by which we have tried to indicate the impression of her appearance forced itself upon Ray's mind like something inevitable, the only human phrase for the occasion.

"You have been blasted!" he cried. "What is it? What *can* ail you? Joan? *Joan?*"

"Have you written to your mother?" she began, in a lifeless voice.

"No."

"I am glad of that. Don't do it — just yet."

"I cabled her this morning."

"Oh! — I am sorry."

"I suppose I might have waited — a little, but I could n't; I was too happy. I did n't think you 'd mind it, dear. Do you — so much?"

"I am sorry," repeated Joan. "I wish you had not done it."

The lover's ardent face sank.

"I did not mean to hurry you — to trouble you in any way. A man is not the same. I have to learn what a woman is. Forgive me, Joan."

"Oh!" said Joan, "it is *you* who must forgive *me*."

"*You?* I would forgive you anything you ever did — or ever can."

Joan stood averted; she stirred

slightly at these words; she seemed to drink them.

"I shall remember that," she breathed. "I thank you for saying that."

She tottered for a moment, like a soldier who has been hit, but rides on; men have found such stiff and dead upon their horses. Then quietly and dully, without a particle of drama, she spoke these words:–

"Douglas, I cannot marry you. I cannot be your wife."

Ray had extended his arms, but they dropped. He regarded her with the still confident, but slightly puzzled expression of a man whose attitude of mind does not shift easily; his had the leisurely movement of his nationality, and lumbered at that moment.

"I suppose," he said coldly, "this

is one of the caprices of the feminine nature? I lack a liberal education in it. I do not know how to deal with it. Can't we omit these — superfluities from our relations, Joan?"

"You told me last night that I am incapable of caprice," slowly replied Joan. "And I am not descending to a superfluity. If I were, your lightest wish would wrench me out of it."

At this the slight frost he had melted in his warm, wet eyes.

"I might have known you did not mean it; I should have known. Forgive me, lassie!"

"But I did mean it," said Joan deliberately. "I do mean it. Most unhappily, I must mean it. I cannot marry you. I cannot be your wife. Yes, I know I said I would last night.

To-night I must unsay it — all. I must recant our happiness."

"You cannot recant our love!"

"I cannot recall my own . . . for you. I wish I could."

"Nor mine for you, by Heaven!" cried the Scotchman. "It is a fact. I told you how it is. It is fixed. You cannot interfere with it. I swear a woman shall not meddle with a man — like that. You cannot defy the laws of nature. They are stronger than you. And so am I. And so is the love I gave you. Do you suppose it is a dead leaf that you should toss it away?"

"I wish I could," repeated Joan, sighing. "For your sake and for mine."

"Its roots have gone down — like a mountain's," said Ray sternly. "Are you going to peck at it with a lady's

fan? I have heard that women do such things, sometimes. You can make me . . . most miserable, Joan, if you choose to . . . play with me!"

"I do not play with you!" cried Joan in a voice of unbearable anguish. It was the first sign of suffering that she had permitted herself, and across the countenance of her lover passed the first serious, or at least the first evident apprehension that she was in mortal earnest. He put out both hands as if he groped for his words:—

"We are man and woman—you my woman, I your man. You gave me your word. I hold you to it."

"I ask you to free me from it."

"Why?"

"I cannot tell you why."

"I thought she loved me," muttered Ray; he looked at her, but it was as

if he did not see her; he seemed to be speaking to something that stood beyond her; invisible, yet immovable like the shape of fate. Joan did not answer. Her silence began to hammer into the man's brain like the nail that was driven into the brain of Sisera.

"I tell you I can't unlove. I 'm not that kind of man. It makes no difference what *you* do, how *you* feel. Nothing can stop my loving you."

"Not even my . . . caprice? Not even my cruelty?" she quivered.

"Not even your cruelty!" thundered Ray. "Not anything you can inflict on me — not any wrong you can do me, or do yourself. No! As God hears me — *No!*"

Joan was visibly agitated by this protestation. She had gone over to the fireless grate, and was now stand-

ing in her long gray dress, with her hands upon the mantel, and her face upon her hands.

Douglas Ray, as he said, was not past master in the education which comprehends, and hence may conquer, Woman.

Viewed in the large, spelled with a capital, the topic confused him. He could think of nothing better to do at that moment than to argue with Joan.

"Last night — do you remember?"

"Oh, I remember it all — everything!"

"What you said?"

"All I said."

"What you did?"

"Everything I did. I would kiss you as many times more. I am not sorry . . . for that. Did you think I was ashamed?"

Joan lifted her head nobly.

"But to-night — just now — when I came in" —

"Yes, to-night, when you came in. I let you — I could not help . . . so much. I love you, Douglas. Do you think I ought to be ashamed? I had not thought — of that. I was . . . pretty tired. I was . . . glad to see you; but it must not happen any more. No — no. You must not . . . after this."

She put out one trembling hand. He, who had stepped toward her, retreated before this white barrier as if it had been a wall of crystal; it was as transparent, but as hard to pass.

"Mother used to teach me," pleaded Joan, in a broken, girlish voice, "that I must not let a man . . . touch me . . . unless . . . And I cannot be your

wife. I have thought a great deal about my mother, since . . . I used to try to please her, even when I was a grown-up girl. When I made her little promises, I always kept them."

She murmured on, to Ray it seemed incoherently. He stood staring. The only explanation of Joan's condition which now presented itself to him was the same which had occurred to the old family servant. Had Joan Dare lost her reason? That firm, wholesome reason which so happily distinguished her? Why, she was saner than any woman he knew!

"Where is Mary Caroline?" he asked abruptly. "I want to see her a minute."

He started to the door. But Joan had stepped between him and it.

"Mary Caroline is not in," she said,

with an escaping eye. "She has gone out."

"Then I will wait till she comes back."

"It may be quite late," argued Joan — "too late. I don't think you had better, — not to-night."

Ray turned, with his obstinate Scotch expression, wheeled suddenly, took Joan in his arms, and carried her to the tall chair where they had sat last evening. There, despite herself, he held her, and then he began to talk.

He perceived, now, that it was no skirmish in which he was engaged, and he laid siege with the solidity of a determined nature. He began by reviewing the situation calmly; he deferred to her reason, to her pride, to her conscience: then to her ideas of

justice, to her sense of honor, to all the strongest faculties and qualities that she possessed. From this ground he retreated subtly, and deliberately attacked her weakness. He challenged her love, he doubted her loyalty, he played upon her tenderness. He smote her quickening sensibilities as if she had been a breaking harp. Joan clenched her hands and locked her lips.

Beyond an invisible line, which she had drawn for herself, she would not go. It was as fatal and as formidable as a magic circle. All the resources of the man failed to cross it. When he found that this was so he began to reproach her.

"I had the right to demand your reasons. You have given me none."

"Alas, I have none to give you."

"What do you expect a man to be-

lieve under circumstances like these? What shall I think?"

"Believe what you must. Think what you will. I have no reason to offer you."

"I have the right to demand it," he repeated.

"You *had* the right. You have it no longer. I have taken it from you. I have nothing more to say. I" —

Suddenly but solemnly Ray closed her lips with his.

"Have you nothing to say to me now?"

"Nothing — more."

"Nor now?"

"Oh, no — oh, no."

"Nor yet?"

Then for the first time that evening two strong, stinging tears slid down Joan's cheeks.

"You make it so hard! You make it so hard!"

This was more than the lover could bear, and he spared her immediately.

"Child," he said, with the forbearance and gentleness of tone with which one addresses the sick or the helpless, "you are overwrought, to-night. I will not trouble you any longer. We will talk another time."

Joan had released herself from him and stood in the sombre light, swaying as if she were trying to find her footing. There was that in her eyes which would have touched a savage. Before it, the compassionate, finely-fibred man who loved her broke and yielded altogether.

When she said, "We must not talk again. I should rather you would not —come" — he turned and left the room without a word.

She heard him put on his coat. She saw him take up his hat and lay his shaking hand upon the bolted door.

When he had opened it, he looked back. She was standing where he had left her, alone in the middle of the large, dim room, in her gray dress, with her blighted face. She seemed to hold out her hands to him; then they fell, and hung down straight at her sides.

As Ray went out of the front door Martin Luther came in. The collie, who had, either purposely or accidentally, been left out some time, entered with an injured air, but, diverted by one of the responsibilities which dogs take so seriously, began to scent the passing of the Scotchman's feet, or some other canine hallucination which disturbed him. This he was tracing

towards the foot of the stairs when Joan called him back.

"Martin Luther," she said pathetically, "are n't *you* going to stay by me? There is n't anybody else."

She put her arms about the dog's neck, and hid her face upon his ruff.

CHAPTER IV

HE suburb of Maple-leaf has the rural traits which its pretty name suggests, together with the urban temperament which made it natural that such a name should be attached to it. Some one of the salesmen, book-keepers, or small merchants who selected and settled the spot had possessed a certain imagination.

Escaping the city in the fall of the leaf, he had tramped joyfully through drifts of driving oak and maple, elm and ash and chestnut, which filled the roads of a village then almost as naïve

as if it had been curled at the feet of Monadnock. These streets he had in due season marked with an arcade of little maples, that in the days of which we speak had become an arch of carmine, gold, and glory.

The maple, although it has orange moods, is known in New England as the tree that is red three times a year: at the blossom, at the seed, and at the dying. In May, the children climb to tear the crimson feathers from the lower branches; in October they wade knee-deep through the flood of color which flows from sidewalk to sidewalk, crackling deliciously beneath the feet.

Mapleleaf is eight miles out from the city which is said to have, with the possible exception of Canton and Liverpool, the most beautiful suburbs in the world.

Of these some are more fashionable, but none more persuasive than the little community of which we write. It might best be described in the Southern word "homey." It unites the independence of the town to the good-fellowship of the country. It is at once initiated and provincial. It wears the latest mode, and follows the newest fads. It hears the popular lecturer, the great singer, and the reigning play. It has its fifty trains a day (both ways) and the fifteen-minute trolley schedule. It has its kindergarten and its High School, its Ladies' Wednesday Club, its caterer, its bank, its telephone exchange, its hospital. In short, Mapleleaf is equipped, if not élite.

In this attractive little town the family of Joan Dare were conspicuous and influential. It was, in fact, Josiah

Dare, her father, — a respected bookseller of the city, — who had planted the maple arches and developed the suburban imagination. This is not so common that it did not make its mark. He was the first deacon of the church, the first president of the bank. The trolley, the telephone, the public library, the drinking-fountain, the Citizens' Improvement Association owed their comfortable existence to his energy and ingenuity. The lesser suburb is even more a one-man community than the country village, and in Mapleleaf Josiah Dare was the man.

His daughter had that quiet social ease and unquestioning assurance of position which belong to the "first lady" of a small but not a rural neighborhood. The family had known their share of troubles, like other people.

Perhaps (like other people) they may sometimes have thought it a heavy share. But the sorrows of her first youth were well behind Joan, and when she took the unread book of happiness in her hands, turned the first page and tossed it away, she had the equipment for joy which only pain can give. Her Sunday visits to the elaborate suburban cemetery where her parents lay had long since ceased to give her acute grief. Her free and solitary life with her old servant had begun to assume a shade of monotony. Sometimes she caught herself saying: —

"This is a doll's house after all. What would a real home be?"

She was ready for love; she was ripe for happiness. Without a moment's hesitation she had dashed both down.

Only second in importance to the

church, and secretly believing itself to be of more than the bank, the library, or the Improvement Association, the Ladies' Wednesday Club of Mapleleaf was, and is, a power not to be derided or ignored. To-day, in fact, the Ladies' Wednesday Club of this agreeable suburb represents the great Affiliation of the nation, forty thousand women strong in the state alone. At the time of which we write, the Wednesday Club was relatively a primitive but still a powerful body; a significant substitute for the sewing-circle of the rural districts and of an elder day. Of this organization, Joan had long been the president, and her recent absence from its sessions had not passed without remark.

One Wednesday afternoon some five or six weeks after the opening date of

our story, the delinquent officer unexpectedly presented herself to the hostess of the day's occasion, who was, in fact, the wife of the minister. Joan was greeted in a pointedly Christian manner, and with a warmth so effusive that it gave the impression of misplaced italics.

The parsonage was full, and a trembling lady in a cobalt silk dress (this was before the day of white silk shirt waists) was quavering forth her views on the Italian Renaissance. These, at the appearance of Miss Dare, came to an abrupt and embarrassing stop.

As Joan entered the bright, crowded rooms, they seemed to roll and divide before her as the Red Sea divided before the Israelites. Waves of guarded faces rippled around her. Whispers like the trickle of waters hushed at her ap-

proach; Joan was conscious, in fact, that every eye was upon her, and that half the lips in the room were busy with her name. She perceived that she was at the mercy of one of the cruelest of human forces — the power of the feminine tongue.

Whatever her purpose in coming to the Club at all had been, Joan seemed abruptly to change it. The color did not rise upon her pale face, but her eyes hardened. The presiding officer of the day made way for her, but Joan by a gesture declined. She stood for a moment with her firm hand upon the table, closed and strong, as if it had been a gavel with which she commanded attention: this, her manner and attitude enforced peremptorily.

"Ladies," she said, speaking quite distinctly and with great composure,

"I have come to resign my office as the president of this organization. I am sorry to do so. I have not now the leisure necessary to fill the position with which you have so long honored me. I thank you for that honor, and for your kindness and your confidence."

Her voice faltered a little upon that last word, but she added no other to it. She looked for a moment upon the faces of her old neighbors and friends; her expression was inscrutable; it seemed to remove her from them even before she turned and left them with a proud and quiet step.

As she passed through the hall, the door of the study opened, and the minister, wearing that resigned and hopeless, but still slightly injured expression with which a man receives the presence of a Woman's Club in his own

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"LADIES," SHE SAID, "I HAVE COME TO RESIGN MY OFFICE AS PRESIDENT OF THIS ORGANIZATION"

house, came out and spoke to her. He was an elderly man and had known Joan since she was a little girl.

"My dear," he said, "what does this mean?"

"It means that I am very busy," said Joan slowly. "I cannot listen to papers on the Italian Renaissance this winter."

Her eye answered the challenge of his, defiantly.

"I am coming to see you," said the minister, with his hand upon the door, which he opened for her with a deferent courtesy.

"Thank you, Mr. Cotton," said Joan coldly, "but it's hardly worth while. If I should need you I would send."

"Do you think I shall wait for that?" demanded the clergyman.

Rebuffed but resolute, he stood watch-

ing her as she went down the concrete walk of his hundred-foot lot and rapidly disappeared at the corner of the street. She did not look back.

Had she done so, she might not have been taken off her guard, when short, nervous, feminine steps hurried up and overtook her.

She gave one little warm outcry, such as that with which women greet each other when they meet affectionately.

"Annie! *you!* I have not seen you — it seems a great while."

Mrs. Hammerton, panting and flushed, tried to fall into step, but the short span of her little feet found it as hard to keep pace with her friend as if Miss Dare had been a man.

"I have called two or three times. Nobody answered the bell," she complained.

"I must have been out," said Joan calmly.

"Mary Caroline has left you?"

"Mary Caroline has left me."

"And you are living there alone?"

"Why, no! I have Martin Luther."

The neighbors walked on together for a few moments in uncomfortable silence. It was a November day, bitter to its heart's core. The maples were stripped and shivering, and dead leaves crackled on the concrete at the feet of the two women. Annie Hammerton, in her new fall suit, looked a little creature, too small to grapple with a great subject. Joan glanced down upon her with a certain compassion.

"Well?" she said, "what is it, Annie?"

"I do not know how," stammered Annie. "I left the Club on purpose —

I hurried after you — I thought I might not have a better chance — I felt that somebody ought to speak to you."

"What about?" asked Joan, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"That is just it," pleaded Mrs. Hammerton. "I am ashamed to tell you what it is about."

"Then why do you?" asked Joan quietly.

"Because somebody must," cried Annie. She put her hand upon the arm of her taller friend, and clung to her as she uttered these trembling words.

"Joan, somebody has got to tell you. There are stories — dreadful things" —

"Yes?"

"About you — about you!"

"Yes," replied Joan.

"Oh, you have heard them, then?"

Annie's voice relaxed into a tone of melting relief.

"No," replied Joan, "I have heard nothing. You are the first person who has spoken to me like this. I think," she added, after a surcharged moment in which each studiously avoided looking at the other, "that it would be better if you were the last."

Mrs. Hammerton's hand fell slowly from the arm of her friend.

"You are not a married woman," she said, not without dignity, "and I am. I think I ought to tell you. I think I ought to warn you. Such talk — such things need some attention. A woman cannot trample them under foot. She can't go right on as if nothing were being said. You ought to trust somebody — to confide in somebody. You owe your friends some explanation."

"Of what?" asked Joan, in a stinging tone.

Mrs. Hammerton made no reply.

They had now reached Miss Dare's avenue, and her old neighbor followed her automatically up to the steps. There Joan paused and turned a glittering smile.

"Won't you come in?" she asked politely.

But Annie Hammerton began to sob.

"Not now—I can't do it! I will try again—some other time."

She turned, and ran down the avenue, hurrying for the green car which cried up the street as Joan put her key into her solitary door.

Within the hall neither voice nor footfall greeted her. If the house had been occupied by the dead—and who could say that it was not?—it could

not have been stiller. Martin Luther was out; affairs of his own, whether political or predatory, detained him — as they often did. Collies are born rovers, and Martin Luther had the habits of his race. Joan found him an uncertain housemate, and missed the society of Mary Caroline, who did not forage for chickens, or hunt foxes, still to be found in the thick woods which rose like ramparts around Mapleleaf.

Miss Dare tossed off her long coat and hat and, with a sigh, went out into the kitchen, there to be met by the too candid signs of her laborious and as yet not successful efforts to compass the domestic arts of which Mary Caroline was past mistress. But, at a glance, Joan's arrested feet stopped short.

The pathetic evidences of disorder and inexperience which she had left

behind her when she hurried to the Wednesday Club had mysteriously vanished. The last pan was scoured; the last towel was washed and neatly hung to dry; a spotless floor and a shining stove received her. From the oven came the strong, warm scent of baking biscuit. A vigorous soup was boiling in the kettle; a pie which seemed to have been hastily made, and was uncooked, stood on the dresser. Joan stared at the miracle.

After a few moments of puzzled reflection, she went upstairs to change her dress, but thought better of it and soon came down and examined the kitchen carefully. She tried the back door; it was locked as she had left it, and the key, which she had removed, hung by its leathern tag in its place on a nail at the jamb of the door. She

tried the windows — they were locked; the pantry — it was fast; the laundry — it was bolted. Conscious of a vague uneasiness, and yet despite herself aware of something like a sympathetic protection, whose source she could not explain, Joan prepared her supper thoughtfully. Martin Luther, who now began to feel the need of his, scratched peremptorily to be let in. Joan took down the key with the leathern tag, let the dog in, locked the door, and hung the key again.

It was perhaps half-past seven that evening that the fate with the ring in its mouth knocked boldly at the front door. Joan answered the summons promptly, but when she saw from whom it came, she drew back a step or two. Douglas Ray did not wait to be ad-

mitted, but pushed in and shut the door behind him. Joan had not seen him since the evening when they had parted at her behest. He had written her many letters. Some she had answered, some she had not. She had intimated to him plainly that his presence was undesired by her, and he had taken her at her word.

He had taken her at her word — till this. But now he seemed to elect that she should take him at his. There was that in his manner which told her that his errand was serious, and that she had better not fence with it or him.

"Your house is cold and cheerless," he began. "May I light the fire?"

"Why, certainly," said Joan, "that is, if you are going to stay long enough."

Without waiting for her permission,

he had stooped and struck a match to the cannel in the grate.

"I cannot tell," he answered, with his Scotch expression, "how long I shall stay. But long enough, Joan, to say that which has brought me here."

The flaring fire leaped towards him as if it would offer the welcome that she refused. When he stood aside, the large, dusk room seemed to lift the lids from its darkened eyes. The books in the tall cases regarded the two; they gave the impression of doing so consciously; as if, indeed, they were the only intelligent and responsive companions of the solitary woman.

"Come, now," said Ray comfortably. "Is n't this better? Is n't this pleasant?"

"It is pleasant," admitted Joan, in a

very low voice, "I do not know that it is better."

She had not offered him a chair, nor made any movement to take one herself. She stood, tall and motionless in the steel-gray poplin dress that she had worn at the Wednesday Club. It was a dull, unyouthful costume, and seemed to contend with Joan's natural brilliance and beauty. These, the lover perceived, had suffered a reduction of tone and power since he had seen her last. The room behind her was now fluent with shadows, as the house around her seemed filled with ghosts. She had an unreal look.

"I have come," said Ray, "to speak with you upon an important matter—you had better sit down, Joan," he added, as if he had been the master of the house and she his guest.

With evident reluctance she obeyed him, and he seated himself at a little distance from her. By mutual instinct, both avoided the Morris chair.

"Now," asked Joan, "what is it, Douglas?"

Abruptly Douglas plunged: —

"It is necessary for some one to tell you that you have inexplicably become the subject of distressing gossip. Its source or its cause I do not know. That it is destitute of foundation makes it the more monstrous. It is like a house hanging from a balloon and swaying in the air," ventured the architect. "But that does not alter the case — beyond a certain point. I have come to talk it over with you."

"I have nothing to say," replied Joan.

"Not even to me?"

"Not even to you."

"Your father is dead," urged the dismissed lover, speaking very slowly and with great distinctness. "Your brother is dead. You have not a man relative in the world within your reach. You are without a natural protector. But you must be protected, and I propose to do it."

"How?" asked Joan, with a sad little smile.

"Give me your confidence," entreated Ray, "and I will tell you how."

She shook her head. "I have no confidence to give you."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Perfectly."

"I thought you might rather — I thought it would be less painful for you to hear it from me. You must hear it from somebody."

"I have already heard it," admitted Joan, "from my oldest and dearest woman friend."

"What have you heard?"

"That I am being talked about. That there are stories."

"Nothing more?"

"That is all. I thought it was enough."

"Has no one told you," demanded Ray sternly, "that the people of this town suppose you to be living here alone with a stranger? In short," he added desperately, when he had waited in vain for Joan's reply, "it is said that there is a man in this house."

These words came from Ray's lips as if each one had been a drawn tooth. She could hear him groan. He had turned frightfully pale.

"Poor Douglas!" said Joan gently.

"Of course," he began again with a catch in his breath, "this is, as I said, a monstrous story. But I should like to be able to *say* something about it."

"Have you ever seen this — this fabulous creature?" asked Joan, with curling lip.

"No! God forbid! No!"

"Has anybody else?"

"You know," suggested Douglas Ray, with a merciful but pitiful attempt to be jocular, "that phrase people use in the country, '*There are those that*' — There are those that affirm some such preposterous legend, Joan."

"And you," demanded Joan, "what have *you* said?"

"I have said," replied Ray, "everything that a man can say in behalf of a woman, without injuring the woman. I have done everything except to kick

the whole village into the sewer. But I thought I had — I think I have the right to your confidence. I am here to ask for it."

"I have none to give you," answered Joan. "I have nothing to say. If my life and my character cannot defend me from this thing, no man can — or shall," she added through set teeth.

"I thought if you would take Mary Caroline back?" pleaded Ray, "or send for some elderly female relative? or do *some*thing to put a stop to this thing?"

"I can do nothing," answered Joan, "to put a stop to it."

"Not even offer me some explanation? Something I *could* say?"

"I have no explanation to offer you," she repeated monotonously. "Not even if you do not trust me any longer. I cannot help that. You need not unless

you want to. There is no reason why you should trust me unless you choose. I have no claim upon your confidence, Douglas, except that you have known me a good while — and that you did love me."

Her voice trembled almost imperceptibly upon the last three words, but her eyes were staring bright and dry.

Then swiftly, with a heart-breaking, sweet smile, she held out her hand.

"Good-night," she said, "good-by."

"I will say good-night," he answered, "but I will never say good-by."

He offered her no caress, but took the hand she lent, and held it mightily in both of his; then bowed his face upon it and staggered to the door.

"Don't mind it so, Douglas," pleaded Joan. "It cannot — it cannot be

helped! I am sorry, but I am not ashamed."

As unconsciously as her shadow followed her, the woman in that vital moment had followed her lover. Both had now crossed the threshold of the library. His hand was upon the knob of the door, when the red hall light flared in some sudden draft. While the two stood there mute and miserable, a footfall clicked distinctly somewhere overhead.

"There!" cried Ray. "What is that?"

"It might be Martin Luther," suggested Joan, with composure.

But as she spoke these words, there reverberated from hall to hall and from wall to wall of the silent house a muffled hollow noise. It was the sound of a man's cough.

CHAPTER V

AT the time of our story the church terrestrial in the town of Mapleleaf was like the church celestial of religious hope and dream — it was one and indivisible. With a fine unconsciousness of any other existing sect The Denomination represented ecclesiastical Christianity to an incurious acceptance. The people, untempted by any other, took their inherited polity as a matter of course, and the Protestant community referred to their religious organization with the tone, if not the accent, of good Catholics. One said The Church. To-

day there are five in Mapleleaf. Then there was only the complacent, commonplace edifice which sat back in the square as easily as a commuter in a car seat. Had the building not been of wood, and painted a chilly brown, it would have failed to meet the suburban architectural ideals at that day in vogue.

In fact, the church met most of the suburban ideals — these were not exacting — and received in return the unqualified allegiance of people who regarded their church as a soul insurance corporation, and their pastor as a species of religious clerk or agent hired for spiritual occasions to make out the policies. In a word, the little Congregational parish of Mapleleaf was a large force — the strongest in the town. In it were vested the moral and social

codes. Out of it went the written and unwritten law. Its fiat was irretrievable. There was no appeal from its verdict; whether it educated saints or cultivated sinners, whether it had inspirations or made mistakes, whether it represented God's heart or man's stupidity, it represented power. One might as well fling one's self before the fender of the green car blurring down the hill before one could read its number, as oppose one's self to the judgment, the will, or the tradition of the village church.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the absolute oligarchy which handed the pastor his salary four times a year on quarter-day, the parish of Mapleleaf had in its pulpit a man.

The Rev. Eliakim Cotton was an elderly man, as we have said; there was

snow on his hair, there was fire in his eye, there was sun in his smile. He represented the notable instance of a New England minister who was not afraid of his people. When he had occupied the parsonage with the hundred-foot lot and the concrete walk for five years, the usual movement to exchange a pastor whose virtues you know for one whose faults you do not know was accidentally omitted from the politics of the congregation — who could say why? — and Mr. Cotton, holding over that mysterious danger line, had remained where he was. He had now been the minister of Mapleleaf for twenty years.

Some ten months from the date of the last chapter which we have recorded in the biography of Joan Dare, the Rev. Mr. Cotton sat in his study

with iron on his lips, and trouble in his eyes. His committee sat with him — five in number: two deacons, the clerk, the theological member, and the rich member.

The minister was in his study chair before his old walnut desk; this showed the precision of a methodical man. No letter went astray, no paper played truant, no book lolled upon that sacred surface; the pens rested in their rack with an air of infinite leisure; only his blotter showed the signs of work, and that was black with it.

The room was brown and ascetic. The ragged carpet was darned, the faded furniture was patched, but the large bookcases were full. Above the mantel hung an old-fashioned lithograph of Cromwell preaching to his pious soldiers. Behind Mr. Cotton's

chair John Calvin, seeming almost as large as life, and quite as shocking, gasped forever upon his death-bed. One was therefore surprised that a photograph of Da Vinci's Christ was fastened to the revolving bookcase, close within the minister's reach; this occupied such a position that his eyes constantly met it.

The theological member (who had just been speaking) followed the minister's glance; but it was not apparent that he saw the picture. The rich member looked at his watch; he felt that he was wasting time; there was no money to be made out of the occasion, and, it seemed, no progress either. The rich member frowned at the dilatory nature of these ecclesiastical matters; a man of affairs would have acquitted or condemned the accused, and

been done with it, an hour and a half ago. In point of fact the minister and his committee had been in executive session behind locked doors for two hours, and had come to no agreement. Within the incumbency of the present pastor no similar case had come before the attention of the church of Maple-leaf. The senior deacon could not recollect that he had ever been called upon to discipline a member for an important offense.

"She has been in regular standing a good while," he sighed. "If I am correct, she made a profession when she was in early youth. She still attends Divine Service and the weekly conference of prayer."

"It is an extraordinary case," observed the junior deacon. "I never knew one like it. I deeply deplore it, brethren.

I greatly regret the necessity of action upon it."

"What would you do?" asked the senior deacon uneasily.

"That's it! That's it!" cried the rich member. "What *will* you do? Put it that way. Put it in any way, only *do* something, gentlemen! Make a move! Make *any* move and I'll second it."

"I move," suggested the theological member, "that a committee of three be appointed to visit the accused, and confer with her as to the nature of her offense."

"Second the motion!" said the rich member, getting to his feet. "Why not this evening? What's the use of wasting time? Time, gentlemen, is always above par."

"These rumors are an injury to the

church," argued the theological member. "It is common scandal. It is a very serious matter."

"She always has borne an unblemished reputation," argued the junior deacon timidly. His eyes met those of the minister, which had assumed a stern expression. At this point some one proposed that the pastor should become one of the committee selected to confer with the offending member.

"I decline," said the Rev. Mr. Cotton shortly. "I absolutely decline to have anything to do with such a step. You know my opinion, gentlemen. I have expressed it to you repeatedly. If you hound down this unhappy woman you will do it without my approval or my sanction. I have explained my position in this matter to you till there

is really nothing more for me to say about it."

"Have you ever reasoned with her yourself, sir," asked the theological member, "as to the nature of her offense?"

"I have said everything to her that I can properly say," replied the pastor gravely.

"Does she offer any explanation or — exculpation of her conduct?"

"Neither. None whatever."

"You defend her — in face of the facts, do you?"

"I do not understand the facts, sir. Do you?"

"But," persisted the theological member, "the question is, do you defend her conduct?"

"Her conduct is a mystery," replied the minister. "But her spotless char-

acter is her advocate. I will not arraign her for I don't know what. The only Christian course to pursue, in my opinion, is to let the poor girl alone. Time may justify her against these unfortunate suspicions. I say time should be given her. If we don't trust her, who will? If we show her no mercy, who should?"

The clerk, a little silent man who had scarcely spoken, now observed tentatively: "The offending member should first be visited, as our polity requires, in a friendly capacity by one or two fellow-members. She should be approached in a friendly manner, before she is officially censured."

"This has already been done," said the minister sadly. "Some ladies of the congregation have called upon her; my wife was one of the number, and Mrs.

Hammerton; I grant you that this difficult duty has been performed with as much delicacy as the case admits of. Ecclesiastically I own that you are free to act, in this case, gentlemen, if you insist upon it. My advice is against it, that's all. If you prefer to talk it over," he added, "without me, suppose I give you the opportunity?"

"That might be advisable," replied the senior deacon thoughtfully, "even if it is a little out of order. It won't take us long, Mr. Cotton. We'll call you."

"Very well," assented the minister. He rose at once and left the room; he did not seek his wife; they had talked this thing out till there was nothing more to be said; the minister had been forced to observe that Mrs. Cotton underwent variations of this painful theme; he

could not at any given crisis in the affair predicate that her opinion would or would not coincide with his own. He paced the oil-cloth of his little dark entry hotly till his committee recalled him.

"Well, gentlemen?" he began.

But he saw before they spoke that they had decided against him. The elderly minister had never played lackey to his committee. But he knew them. He made no idle attempt to dissuade them from their purpose, but seemed rather suddenly to fall into step with it.

"I see that you intend to act in this matter. Perhaps it is as well," he said unexpectedly. "It will satisfy you. And it won't" — but he paused. He could not say that the official censure of her church would not harm the

arraigned church-member. He contented himself with asking the sub-committee to report the result of their effort at once, and, when they had hurried over the necessary formalities which intervened, the clerk, the senior deacon, and the theological member put on their hats and went out.

In a short time — a very short time — they returned.

It was a warm September night, and one of the study windows was open. The committee, as they came up the concrete walk, saw the tall figure of their minister pacing the floor with an unendurable nervousness. The junior deacon, who was not a nervous person, sat reading the denominational weekly. The rich member was casting up accounts in his pocket diary. These two

men got to their feet at once, and the minister ran like a boy to open the front door.

"Gentlemen," he began eagerly, "you made a short call."

"Long enough," snapped the senior deacon. "Too darned long in my opinion."

Now history recorded not in that parish the time when the senior deacon had been heard to say "darn." The minister allowed himself a secular laugh.

"We must appoint a committee to call on *you*, my brother," he suggested pleasantly. Then he repeated his phrase.

"Well, gentlemen?"

He turned the key in the study door, and the six church officers confronted each other for a moment in silence. The gravity of their position now

urged itself upon the lightest of them; and none of them were careless men.

"Well?" reiterated the pastor.

"I move," said the senior deacon, "that we proceed with the case. It should come before the church."

"I second the motion," said the theological member eagerly. "It is a clear instance of falling from grace."

"Our sister seems to me to be a sad woman," ventured the little clerk. "And a comely. I regretted our errand when we had accomplished it."

"I did *not*," said the senior deacon. "We were not received in a proper manner."

"May I ask," inquired the pastor, "how you were received?"

"As if she had been the Queen of Heaven, sir. She had that — that general appearance, sir."

"She gave no evidence of conviction of sin," said the theological member.

"She had a beautiful collie with her," deprecated the little clerk.

"A vicious dog," urged the theological member. "He snapped at me twice."

"She did not even ask us to be seated," complained the senior deacon.

The pastor bit off an unsanctified exclamation between his teeth. There dashed before him a flashlight of the scene — that desolate, delicate woman — those three well-meaning, stupid Christians — the insolent nature of their errand — they men, *all men!*

"There should have been a woman among you if you had to go!" blazed the minister.

"The polity of our church does not place females upon the governing

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"SHE RECEIVED US AS IF SHE HAD BEEN THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN, SIR"

board," the theological member reminded him.

"Then it ought to!" cried the elderly minister, "and I have been preaching forty years and never thought of it till this minute."

The Rev. Eliakim Cotton was a man, as we have said, and for a moment's span he could have cried "Shame!" upon his ecclesiastical officers. But he had the graciousness of his wide experience, and of his large heart, on which saint and sinner both must lean.

"They think they are doing right," he thought. "They, too, must be led."

His closed hand relaxed; it fell upon the open Testament on his study table. He wheeled in his chair, and turned his pale face instinctively towards the Leonardo's Christ. He did not look

at Oliver Cromwell; and John Calvin was behind him.

"My brothers," he said gently, "before you decide this question I should like to say a little more about it."

Then the Rev. Eliakim Cotton began to talk.

It was then well after nine o'clock. It was past ten when the church officers left the study, and quietly separated for the night. When the door closed upon the last of them (it happened to be the theological member) the Rev. Mr. Cotton ran to the foot of the stairs and eagerly called his wife: —

"Maria? Maria! Come down, please. I want you to accompany me on an errand of Christian mercy."

"Where?" asked Mrs. Cotton, "and what for?"

She stood in her wrapper, with her

arms upraised; she was putting her gray hair in crimping-pins for the night.

"We are going to Joan Dare's at once — immediately. Come, Maria! Put your things on, won't you? I will explain on the way over."

"I 've got a headache," urged the minister's wife.

The minister whirled on the heel of his well-worn boot.

"Very well," he said. "Then I must go without you."

"Oh, but you can't do *that*. It would n't do, Mr. Cotton. You would be talked about."

"When I 'm afraid of being talked about," returned Mr. Cotton slowly, "I will give up preaching. I suppose if I went to hell after a lost soul the parish would talk about it. But *my*

parish knows I should *go* if I thought I ought to."

"You put me in a hard position," complained Mrs. Cotton, "and it would take me so long to dress — Eliakim? *Eliakim!*"

But the Reverend Eliakim Cotton had left the house. He walked rapidly, squaring his bent shoulders; he held his gray head high; his thin hands hung clenched at his sides. He had a headache, too, though he had not mentioned it, and his eyes were tired and strained. As he walked, these tricked him somehow, for the picture on the revolving bookcase appeared to move and swing before him through the deserted streets of Mapleleaf. Now in darkness, then in light — now with a tremor on the lip, then with a tear on the cheek — the saddest and the strong-

est Christ of all that art has offered Christianity followed the old pastor all the way.

The lights were still burning in the house of Joan Dare.

"I am glad of that," he thought — he ran up the steps like a boy — "or else I might have had to give it up."

He did not ring, but lifted the knocker gently; the fate with the muzzled mouth called three times. That had been the minister's knock ever since Joan could remember; she recognized it, and opened the door at once.

The pastor came in without a word, and stood in the middle of the library. Joan, in her long gray dress, stood opposite him. Her face had the wizened look of an animal that is aging from physical pain.

"Joan, I've come to tell you" — he began. But she put up her hand as if she warded off a blow.

"Don't!" she entreated.

"Oh, you poor girl!" cried the minister. "How you suffer!"

He was a tall man, as we have noticed, and he looked down at Joan's upturned face. Afterwards he said of it:

"I have never seen anything like it on any human countenance. It was as if I saw the riven side."

"There, there, my dear," said the pastor. "I came to tell you — I have conferred with my committee. Nothing will come of it, Joan. This ecclesiastical tornado has blown itself out. I am here to tell you not to distress yourself — I thought," he added, "you would sleep better to know."

But Joan had sunk upon the nearest

chair and hid her face. Since she was a girl, when she had great troubles to bear, the minister had never seen this self-possessed woman cry. He dashed his own hand across his dim eyes and let her sob it out. He wished he had been a woman, that he might have taken her in his arms and comforted her.

"It 's the insult!" she moaned. "It 's the — disgrace!"

While he stood looking at her with his hands locked behind his black coat, the front door opened without ring or knock, and the swish of a woman's skirt crossed the library floor.

The minister's wife had thrown her long raincoat over her wrapper; her gray hair was half in crimping-pins, half astray upon her wrinkled forehead; she was not a picturesque or æsthetic sight;

but something in her expression made her a beautiful one at that moment to her old husband. He stood aside, and turned his face away, as she flung her thin arms around Joan's shaken shoulders and kissed the stricken girl upon the cheek.

"They 're nothing but men, Joan," said the pastor's wife. "What could you expect?"

Joan slept little and lightly that night, and at half-past four in the morning she was thoroughly awakened. Strange sounds, muffled and stealthy, were in the house. Now and then she had heard something of the kind during the last year, and never without a sense of uneasiness. She had not been able to find any sufficient explanation of the disturbance, or of certain inci-

dents which had accompanied it, and experienced the discomfort of one who will not accept the mystical, and cannot supply the exact hypothesis.

She recalled all that she had read of supernatural phenomena, but without mental hospitality. Her robust, practical temperament recoiled from the occult.

"There is an explanation of everything," she thought. "Perhaps I shall get this one now. I may find out how those things were done for me."

She sprang for her slippers and gown, and trailed softly down the stairs.

All houses are haunted. Ghosts that do not come under the classification of the Psychical Research Society — the love, passion, sin, joy, anguish, sanctity, blasphemy, of family life — wander and contend like spirits forever within

the walls of human homes. So surcharged does a house become with the experience of its occupants that a man with the discomfort of imagination clamors for the right to build his own roof, to haunt it with his own personality, and hand it down in turn to tenants less sensitive than himself.

With ghosts like these the house of Josiah Dare had long been full. Added to their tragic company were there any of the other sort?

Joan admitted asking herself the question; but she went down the back stairs stoutly, and with a colorless face on which the smile of a skeptic and the nerves of a woman warred, pushed open the kitchen door.

She had made no sound in doing this, and her entrance did not disturb the occupant or occupants of the kitchen,

if any such were there. Indeed, if there were any, they were invisible, and Joan was conscious of a clutch at the heart when she perceived that this was the fact.

In the range a fire, built, it seemed, without hands, was burning heartily; Joan noticed that one of the covers was red hot.

"It has been going a good while," she thought.

Bread kneaded, it seemed, without fingers, was in the oven. A boiler lifted without explicable agency stood steaming on the coals. The floor was washed, and the windows. The table was scoured, and the faucets. Joan went to the door. The key hung in its place by its leathern tag on the nail by the jamb. She tried the door. It was locked. At that moment she became

aware that a rhythmical sound which she was sure she had heard when she stepped from the stairs to the kitchen, had abruptly ceased. The kitchen was perfectly still. The room was filled with the unreal light of dawn.

As Joan stood in it, confused and hesitating, she saw a yellow crack at the bottom of a closed door flare and go out like extinguished gas. Hurrying to this door, which led to the laundry, she stumbled over a chair; her hands touched and clutched at something soft; this she drew to the window and examined.

It was a woman's garment; a Scotch plaid golf cape, whose pattern and colors sent the blood driving fast through Joan's veins.

She struck a match, lit a lamp and holding it, she could not have told why,

high above her head, as if she had far to search, opened the door into the laùndry and went in.

Forcing itself against the wall as if it would force itself through to escape detection, a deprecating figure huddled.

Plainly it was the figure of a woman, and Joan's courage lifted. Who could say why a woman's ghost should be more harmless than a man's? It is doubtful if history would reinforce Joan's assumption.

With wet arms bared above the elbows, with red, parboiled hands before her face, the intruder uttered four short words: —

"Oh, Miss Joan dear!"

"Mary Caroline," began Joan sternly, "what does this mean?"

But her trembling lips refused her, and when Mary Caroline held up her

dripping hands, Joan caught and clasped them impetuously — no ghosts they, but warm, living, loving hands, big, work-worn faithful hands — the hands that had served her and toiled for her with the passion of self-effacement that only women know, and which they may offer to another woman as romantically and as loyally as to the master, man.

"What are you doing here?" asked Joan as soon as she could speak. But her eyes answered her own question.

"Your washin'," sobbed Mary Caroline. "I did n't suppose I 'd get caught at it. I 'd a-got 'em all out on the line by half-past six — I see you at it," added Mary Caroline, "nights after dark. I can't stand it, that 's all."

"Mary Caroline," began Joan, across whose face revelation was slowly steal-

ing, "was it *you* who hung out those clothes once when I left the basket under the lines? When I came back they were all up."

"That was me," replied Mary Caroline.

"Was it *you* that baked the biscuits and the pies and washed the floor that day — at the beginning?"

"Yes, that was me."

"Was it *you* who did the ironing three weeks ago in the night? Mary Caroline, was it *you* who gave the kitchen a spring cleaning? And was it *you* Martin Luther roared at so last week at five o'clock — that time he tumbled down the cellar stairs?"

"That was all me," said Mary Caroline with hanging head. She began to cry, as if she had been a guilty child. "Don't scold me for it!"

Joan's lip quivered.

"I *had* to do it," pleaded Mary Caroline. "I had to do it."

"Where do you come from?" demanded Joan. "What are you doing? Where are you staying? Why do you take all this trouble for me, — dear Mary Caroline!"

Mary Caroline went to the laundry window and dashed the shade up. She pointed across the hollow to the short "unaccepted" street that cut between the square and the trolley lines. An acre of Miss Dare's oaks and maples rose beyond the little garden foreground, in which the fire of nasturtiums and salvia, half quenched by frost, seemed to smoke and flare up before it went out.

"Me and my sister have rented that house," said Mary Caroline quietly.

"Them was her young ones that you see playin' round there that day you stood lookin' a long time. I got behind the hen coop. Thanks be to mercy you did n't" —

"But I did! I see now that I did recognize you. It was so incredible, so impossible that I dismissed it from my mind. Mary Caroline, what are you doing this thing for?"

"To be nigh you," said Mary Caroline. "I had to do it."

"But how do you manage? You would not take money from me — at the first."

"No, nor I won't now, Miss Joan."

"Do you mind telling me how you *are* living?"

"Oh, I take in or go out," replied Mary Caroline carelessly. "It don't matter much. I get along. I can set

there of an evenin' and watch your lights till they go out—there! I must put them drafts off my stove."

Mary Caroline dashed into the kitchen, and Miss Dare followed her slowly. When Mary Caroline had closed the drafts, the two women stood and regarded each other with a conscious awkwardness.

Into Joan's puzzled eyes a swift interrogation ran. Her glance fell upon the closed door, whose key hung from its leathern strap upon the nail beside the jamb.

"Mary Caroline," she said abruptly, "I can't understand yet how you got into this house. The house is always locked, and the key is always out."

"There ain't no bolt," returned Mary Caroline with a grim smile. "I get in with my own key."

"Your own key?"

"Why, yes, that there dooplicate you give me when I went out evenin's. I kep' it in my pocket. It has ben there ever since."

From the pocket of her wet dress, drenched with suds, Mary Caroline forthwith produced an old back-door key.

"Do you want it?" she deprecated. "It 's yourn."

Joan shook her head gently, and Mary Caroline restored the key to her pocket with a smile of ecstasy.

"I don't know what *to* say," began Joan lamely. "It is divine; but it is dangerous, Mary Caroline."

"Marm?" said Mary Caroline.

"I can't bear to say — I don't want to tell you — I don't know *what* to say!" cried Miss Dare miserably. Her

clear gaze clouded before the steady eyes of her old servant.

"Seems to me I 'm about as fit to be trusted 's anybody I know on," suggested Mary Caroline, with dignity. There seemed something almost like a reversal of their positions; as if the mistress had in some unexpected sense become answerable to the maid.

"As fit," replied Joan quickly, "as any person I know in the world. But I have nothing to say, Mary Caroline —not even to you."

"I did n't s'pose you had," said Mary Caroline quietly. "You 've grown awful peaked," she added. "I don't wonder, seein 's you have to eat your own cookin'. I 've got two pies in the oven besides the biscuits."

"I must go," cried Joan suddenly; she turned her fine head with a hunted

motion like that of a listening animal. "I must go now, dear Mary Caroline."

"I shall finish that there washin'," Mary Caroline announced. "I don't know 's I care what you say. I ain't a-goin' to leave it in the suds — say! Miss Joan?"

Joan, with her hand on the knob of the half-open door, paused at the foot of the stairs. As she did so she shut the door again, and stood with her back against it.

"Miss Joan," said Mary Caroline, "I hain't nothin' to say but this here one thing. By all them years I done for you — you promise me one promise, an' I won't ask ye no more."

"I'm in something of a hurry," replied Joan, resuming her natural manner. "Tell me what it is, Mary Caroline. I will consider it."

"See that there red tablecloth?" Mary Caroline pointed to the clothes-horse which was standing before the range. "It's most dry now. It needed washin' somethin' awful — Miss Joan, if ever you need me quick and turrible — will you hang that there tablecloth outen the laundry window?"

The tears smarted to Joan's haggard eyes.

"I promise you I will! Dear Mary Caroline! I will indeed."

"An' you remember," said Mary Caroline solemnly, "*thar I be?*"

"I will remember," sighed Miss Dare. A piteous smile shone for an instant upon Mary Caroline, and then the door closed swiftly and quietly between herself and it.

When Miss Dare went into the

kitchen to get breakfast her week's washing hung flapping merrily on the line in a high September wind, and Mary Caroline was gone. When Joan went into the laundry she saw that Mary Caroline had omitted to wash one article. This was a necktie, a summer tie of striped cotton stuff; it might, or it might not have been part of a man's wardrobe. Mary Caroline had folded it very neatly upon the shelf above the tubs and left it there. Joan's fingers closed over it slowly.

CHAPTER VI

VIL report is a thistle-down floating before the eye, a bird fluttering above the hand, a ball and chain clamped upon the feet, a weight locked around the neck. It eludes reason, it flees truth, it incarcerates the free, it drowns the swimming.

Sometimes Joan Dare felt herself barred and bolted apart from human kind; she sat in the "dark solitary" where the remorseless judgment of men and women equally immures the arraigned, the convicted, and the misunderstood. At other times she seemed

to herself to be falling down depths unmeasured, freighted with lead to keep her there, blindly seeing through fathoms of crushing water the stir of happy keels and sails upon the surface of life.

We are used to saying that health is never valued until it is lost, nor happiness unless it is missed, nor affluence till it is gone, nor position unless it is obscured. Which of us estimates the simple value of fair fame? Who of us appraises the common, unnoticed property of an unblemished name? For a good reputation, who takes the trouble to thank God?

One warm night when Joan sat on her doorsteps in the soft autumn dark, the south wind took the voices of passers on the concrete sidewalk and flung at her these words: —

"We ain't anyways uncommon, our family ain't. None of us ever did any great thing. We ain't famous, nor educated, nor rich — we're just plain folks. But there's one thing we've *always* had, and that's *char*acter. I tell you, sir, *it's more precious than rubies.*"

Joan recognized the voice; it was that of a neighbor, a working-man, a poor, uninteresting man; nobody thought much about him, or indeed much of him; he used to take care of her furnace; she could scarcely recall his name.

Her leaping heart scorched her face.

"They are talking about me," she thought. She could well have changed lots with this stupid, irreproachable person, and blessed Heaven for the chance.

The neighborhood gossip of Maple-

leaf was not peculiarly cruel; less so, perhaps, than that of some larger or smaller places. It was and is a kindly, well-meaning suburb, too much involved with the overlapping of metropolitan life to find leisure for the paltry curiosity of more remote and less busy, or more active and less conscientious communities.

The mystery which hung, or which appeared to hang, over Josiah Dare's daughter was not brutally treated; only naturally, perhaps; but, if the village criticism had been of a ruder variety, it could not have doomed her to a solitude more definite or more sad.

The too punctilious recognition, the too mechanical smile, the cool, courteous salutation, the silent avoidance hurt more subtly than the direct insult. Her delicate flesh received poi-

soned assegais rather than bludgeon blows.

Mapleleaf was, in fact, one large family; and when it became known, as everything does become known, in such neighborhoods, that the church had censured, and, it was suspected, had narrowly escaped excommunicating Joan Dare, she found herself the object of a scandal the more serious because no one expressed it to her in so many barbarous words.

Averted looks turned from her in public places. People crossed the street to avoid meeting her. Customers in stores were zealously busy at counters when she approached. Her friends dropped like fading flowers in a steady, rising wind. Her oldest and best proved no exception to the general retreat; Mrs. Hammerton had ceased to visit

her; Mrs. Cotton came several times, but she could not, though, to do her justice, she honestly meant to, divest herself of that pointedly Christian manner which Joan found so trying; and the attempts of the minister's wife to do her duty by the harassed woman were, on the whole, little or no comfort. Mrs. Cotton had exhausted her sympathetic inspirations on that evening when she came to heal the gashes made by the church committee, who were "nothing but men." She found it difficult in colder and heavier air to rise to heights so fine.

But the Reverend Eliakim Cotton persisted with a celestial obstinacy in befriending the unfriended woman; Joan found herself unable to distance the simple, dogged, Christian manliness of her pastor. He would neither desert

her nor neglect her. He ignored her rebuffs, and overlooked the recoil from sympathy which suffering developed in her. But this priestly oversight was, of course, only an occasional break in the monotonous solitude of her life.

With the loyalty of her lover Joan owned it harder to contend. Douglas Ray defended and guarded the ostracized girl as if he had the right to do so which she had denied him. It mattered nothing to him that she fended off his sympathy, declined every practical service which he would have rendered her, and forbade his presence in her house. If he absented himself, it was for her sake. He protected her reputation as if it had been that of his sister; and laid his silent homage at her feet as if she had been his promised wife. He had long ceased to ask for

explanations of the course of life that she pursued. In spite of it, and without them, he preserved an allegiance whose existence she felt as one feels the influence of a range of hills, distant but powerful. In the old Scriptural phrase, she "lifted up her eyes" to it. But she did not tell him so.

On the rare occasions when they met, he found her pale and quiet. She remained calm and dumb. She wrapped herself in a reserve on whose dignity her own mother could not have infringed. She had the expression of a woman whose thoughts are high, but whose attitude cannot be. Her nature seemed to stoop, as if under invisible burdens; her soul, we might say, had begun to grow round-shouldered beneath its load. She had lost the joyous erectness of one who has the confidence

and the respect of her fellow-townsmen. She had acquired the furtive look of the hunted. Her candid eye evaded her neighbors.

Half with censure, half with pity, and always with the irritated wonder of the unimaginative when confronted with a mystery, the people of Maple-leaf watched the movements of the solitary woman.

In her dull gray gown she faced them when she must, or eluded them when she could. Joan now almost always wore gray — who could say why? — as if her misfortunes had selected a uniform. Who can explain why a woman clothes her experience with its kindred or its complementary colors?

There were not wanting a few observers, lovers of the theatre, who half unconsciously associated Joan Dare with

a popular play at that time on the boards in the city, and represented by actors of an excellent grade.

"I can't help it! I cannot help it!" admitted Mrs. Hammerton in a guilty whisper. "But those gray things keep reminding me of Hester Prynne."

Mrs. Hammerton had selected Mrs. Cotton as the recipient of this confidence; as if the fact that she was the wife of a minister palliated or even sanctified the confession.

"Hester Prynne?" asked Mrs. Cotton with a frown of gentle perplexity.

"Why, don't you know? In the 'Scarlet Letter.' All Joan lacks of it is that long gray veil and — one other thing."

"Oh, the 'Scarlet Letter'!" replied Mrs. Cotton. She was familiar with Hawthorne, of course; every educated

woman must be. But the minister's wife did not attend the theatre. She felt the limitations of her ecclesiastical training and position before a worldly experience. To her mind Annie Hammerton's picturesque impression presented no definite significance. The lifeless, loveless draperies of Hester Prynne upon the stage, her blanched face, her sumptuous figure, the pathos of her haughty bearing in public, its more pathetic humility in solitude — Hester, derided on the streets with her child — radiant in the forest with her lover — proud upon the scaffold at his side — and always Hester with the cunning embroidery scarlet and heavy on her breast — these scenes the mind of the theatre-goer carried from the play. But the pastor's wife had read the book a good while ago.

In the now desolate and difficult life of Joan Dare, one woman remained, in the ultimate sense of the word, her friend. Mary Caroline had reached that upper altitude of human loyalty which is content "not to question why." With an intelligence not to be expected of her class, and a reserve hitherto foreign to herself as a specimen of it, the old servant seemed to have reasoned herself or loved herself into such a tact and dedication as forced themselves upon the acceptance of her mistress whether with or against the lady's will.

Often, perhaps too often, Joan, standing in the laundry window which commanded the pretty foreground of garden, the middle distance of the grove, and the perspective of the unaccepted street, perceived the stanch figure of Mary

Caroline occupied with some obvious excuse for being where it was, but secretly, Joan felt, watchful of her house and of herself. She could have identified (she was now sure) the room in which Mary Caroline slept or waked and thought of her; its light burned far into the night; its shade was usually lifted; at any moment a figure might fill it, with arms upraised and large hands carried to its eyes, shutting out the light to penetrate the darkness.

Often, more often again, Joan, coming down in the morning, found in her kitchen the miracles of domestic art against whose loving-kindness she had ceased to contend. Every household task which it was possible for the affectionate burglar with the duplicate latch-key to perform within the house, at hours when such could be secretly

and successfully conducted, Mary Caroline achieved with a triumphant skill.

Joan perceived that her old servant now never, in her wildest or tenderest depredations, stepped beyond the topography of the kitchen. Mary Caroline had reached the point of self-effacement where she respected the will of her mistress, if not the nature of the circumstances which separated the two. Joan, in the darkening dawns of autumn, listened to Mary Caroline's stealthy movements downstairs, and turned and slept. Sometimes she said: "Dear Mary Caroline!" and her lip curved tenderly; it did not tremble; her eyes were bright and dry. Joan had ceased to exhibit signs of emotion. It was as if she now experienced none.

. . . . . .

It was not long after the visit of the church committee at her house — perhaps three weeks or four — that Joan went out one afternoon into the grove beyond the garden with her books and sewing and Martin Luther. It was one of the summer days which may burst like a blossom from the dying roots of the year. It was so warm as to be oppressive, and so dry that the grove was an acre of tinder; the dead leaves would have ignited like gunpowder at a match; the moss crackled beneath the foot; in the garden the frosted flowers tried to lift their heads — the salvia could not, but some of the nasturtiums did.

Across the hollow in the unaccepted street the figure of Mary Caroline passed to and fro beneath flapping white outlines that flung themselves about in

a rising wind, writhing upon a clothes-reel of great size. No weaker woman than Mary Caroline could have grappled with it, in the now considerable breeze. Miss Dare, with a sigh, perceived these indications that Mary Caroline, for eighteen years proud of her position as a trusted family servant, had fallen to another which all her life she would have scorned. That this social descent had been elected for her sake, Miss Dare could not doubt. She remembered Mary Caroline's parting words: —

"Death 'n hell will give up the things that are in them, before I give up feelin' the way I 've always felt to you."

This recollection touched Joan, and when a footstep crackled on the dead leaves of the grove, and she turned

quickly to see who it was, her face carried a softened, suffused appeal—gentler than its now habitual expression.

Half-tints, like the shadows of clouds or the wraiths of color, chased across her cheeks and forehead, when she perceived that Douglas Ray, with a firm step, was coming to her through the complaining leaves. He lifted his hat, but did not speak. Martin Luther had gone to meet him leisurely; the dog's hospitality was dignified and critical; Martin Luther had not forgotten the Morris chair, and regarded Douglas Ray with the suspicion of the collie's bitterest memories.

Joan was sitting on an old rustic seat, moss-grown between two pines, whose needles drifted over her, and upon the magazines and work-basket which lay

beside her. Without remark, Ray took these things off, and sat down in the space that they had occupied. This action was so characteristic of him that she smiled slowly. It was a good while since she had seen him, and in spite of herself her eyes leaned towards him. His fed upon her hungrily. For a poignant moment neither weakened the intensity of feeling by words. Then, abruptly, Joan began to button her long coat, and stooped for her hat, which lay on the leaves at her feet. An iron hand prevented her.

"What are you going to do?" he demanded.

"I'm going into the house."

"Why?"

"I told you not to come."

"You forbade me the house. This is not the house."

"But you may be — will be seen. I do not want you seen here."

"Of course I shall be seen. That is why I am here. The whole world is welcome to see me. I have been waiting for just such a chance. I hope half Mapleleaf will see me. I mean it shall."

Joan put her pathetic lips together. She continued to gather her books and work, and extended her hand for the hat that he held. But he shook his head.

"It is not things that can be *seen* which could harm you — Dear. You know I would not do anything to injure you — not if I never saw your face again. You know I can be trusted to do what is really best for you. You *know* it, Joan."

"Yes," she admitted feebly. "I do

know it. But I do not think you ought to come. Douglas, I do not *want* you to come."

"How much difference," asked Ray, "do you suppose that makes to me? I told you long ago how it is. I told you that I purposed to guard you, to protect you. I have not changed my mind."

"Then go away!" cried Joan with sudden passion.

"I do not intend to go away," replied Ray quietly. "I do not intend to go away at all."

Now Joan's pale face scorched and blazed.

"I did not suppose," she panted, "that I should come to this — that I should ever be insulted — by you."

She got to her feet, and confronted him with a pitiable look. Martin

Luther pushed himself between the two, and began to growl on a low octave.

"Joan, be still!" said Ray sternly. "You have not lost your wits. Don't act as if you had. If we were not out here where I can't so much as touch the hem of your rain-coat, I should — lassie! I should crush that nonsense out of you. I should kiss you till you — If you don't stay where you are, and treat me properly, I don't know but I shall as it is. I won't answer for myself. — Sit down, Joan, and hear me out. Sit *down*, dear — please."

Martin Luther, who had never been taught to charge, catching the too familiar word "Down!" crouched, with a groan of protest and resentment, at the Scotchman's feet. Joan, too,

obeyed. She reseated herself between the pines, whose shaken needles drove upon her.

"Dogs or women," she said bitterly. "It seems we're much the same. — What do you want of me, Douglas? What are you here for?"

"I am here," said Douglas Ray, in an uneventful tone, "to ask you to become my wife."

"You have asked me that before."

"I seek the honor of your hand again."

"The *honor* of *my*" — Scarlet, she bit her sentence off.

"I repeat," said Ray, "I seek — I urge the honor of your hand in marriage. I propose that you shall become my wife at once. Let us have no more of this misery, Joan. Let us be married, and settle the whole thing — the

whole wretched, cruel thing. It is time we did. I love you, Joan."

"In spite of — it?"

"In spite of *it*."

"Notwithstanding all?"

"Notwithstanding everything — anything."

"Without an explanation of what people call my conduct?"

"I ask no explanations of your conduct. I only ask for yourself."

"Do you mean to say," inquired Joan, brushing a lapful of pine needles on Martin Luther's head, "that you would assume the burden of my — perplexities? That you would share my painful position? After all that has happened! After all this dreadful year! That you would trust me — so far as that?"

"I would trust you," replied Ray

slowly, "further than that, if I could. I suppose a man can't very well go beyond it. I offer you the service and devotion of my life. I urge you to do me the honor to accept the shelter of my name, what people call the protection of a husband's presence. I wish to shield you from everything. I ask you to let me share your troubles — no matter what they are!"

"Even if I could not explain them to you?" quivered Joan.

"If you could have explained them to me," returned Ray quietly, "I know that you would have done so long ago."

"You would take me, mystery and all?"

"And thank God for the privilege," said Ray solemnly.

Joan wrung her thin hands together

where they lay upon her gray dress. Martin Luther put his head in the collie fashion upon her knee. Joan's tense fingers relaxed, and caressed the old dog unconsciously.

Ray looked at the collie with a savage envy.

"A man might better *be* a dog," he said bitterly.

"And yet," she breathed, "other men offer women what they call love! . . . I wish I could! Oh, I wish I could! . . . I *can*not," she added.

"You can, because you must," he answered quickly.

"Alas, I cannot because I must not . . . I thank you, Douglas. You do love me. I see that. I bless you for that."

Then Douglas Ray sternly repeated his old phrase: "The roots of my love

have gone down like a mountain's. Nothing can stir it; nothing that you do or say. You might as well try to overthrow Wachusett with those poor, thin little hands."

"I do not deserve it!" cried Joan passionately. "I do not believe there are many women who would. Men do not love like that. We are not accustomed to it. We have not been taught to be worthy of it."

"Most men have not the honor of loving you," replied the Scotchman simply. — "See here, Joan, I have something to show you."

With an abrupt motion he took from the pocket of his coat a paper, unfolded it, and laid it upon her lap.

In one hurrying glance Joan's startled eyes perceived the full significance of what he had done. The paper was

signed by the town clerk of Mapleleaf, and contained the license for the marriage of Douglas Ray and Joan Dare.

"Come, Joan," said Ray gravely. "Let us not talk about it any more. I wish you to become my wife at once. To-day is just as well as any other time. Whatever it is that distresses you, let me share it. Whatever isolates you, let me bear it. Your trouble shall be my trouble, and your life my life, — your home my home, if that must be. I will ask no questions — I trust you. I will shelter you from everything — I love you. . . . That 's a good man — your dominie — that Mr. Cotton. I have been to talk with him. He will come right over and marry us now. He is waiting to hear from me. He will bring his wife. We shall need one more witness — we will send for

that person down in the hollow hanging out clothes. Something about her looks very familiar to me. — Come, Joan!"

The marriage license fell from Joan's lap, and Martin Luther pounced upon it. In a moment he would have torn it to fringe, but a tremendous grip throttled him, and the dog dropped the paper without a word. Martin Luther, who had been without a master too many years, recognized the hand of one, and yielded to it with the pride of a collie in it.

"I shall either kill that dog, or love him," said Ray through set teeth.

He secured the license and returned it to his pocket. His own face had now become as rigid as the woman's, and had been from the first more resolute.

"Douglas," said Joan feebly, "you

are the best man I ever knew. I wish I could do as you want me to. I cannot—I can*not* do it!"

In the position which the two occupied upon the rustic seat between the pines, Joan's observation commanded, as it had done all the time, the full view of the house; the man sat with his back to it. He had begun to plead with her, more powerfully (to the woman) because more passionately than he had yet done, when he stopped with an abrupt and breathless exclamation. Across Joan's eyes had swiftly crept an expression of something which was neither terror nor entreaty, but a curious interplay of both. He could have said that she made, towards the house, an all but imperceptible sign. He could have sworn that her whole figure and face were significant, conscious, one

might have thought articulate. Did she raise an instinctive hand? Was it a gesture of command? or of supplication? or of anguish?

Then Douglas Ray did a noble thing. He sat still as he was, and did not turn his head. The collie had sprung up and run on towards the house. But not a muscle of the man moved. His face betrayed no more curiosity than the carpet of pine needles beneath her feet.

She was on them and on it now, standing tall and resolute. He rose and confronted her, still with his back to the house.

"I must go!" she panted, "I must go in at once. Let me pass, Douglas. *Dear* Douglas, let me go by you!"

"What's that?" cried Ray, wheeling. "It smells like — it sounds like a

bonfire. It 's too windy a day. It won't do — Where is it ?"

"It 's just a bush," said Joan, resuming herself, "one of those dead spiræa bushes on the edge of the garden. It 's got afire somehow. Don't bother about it, Douglas. It won't amount to anything."

"I 'm not so sure of that," replied Ray decidedly. "It 's a pretty high wind, and very dry. I 'll put it out.— No. Stay still, Joan. I can't have you anywhere around fire with your woman's skirts. Keep the dog off — if you can — and stay just where you are."

Ray hurried across the garden, and she heard him stamping on the little blaze among the spiræa bushes. These were as dry as excelsior and burned obstinately.

The wind had now in fact assumed the proportions of a gale. The grove began to writhe as if it were in fear; the pines and oaks took on the look of living creatures chained to the stake. Mined and countermined with pine needles and dead leaves, consumed by drought, and uncleared for years, the floor of the grove presented a surface parched for ignition. One narrow line of flame, like a long fuse, ran from the bush to the underbrush.

It did not take Joan long to perceive that the blaze was beyond the control of one man, and she pushed through the now stifling smoke.

"I can help!" she cried. "Between us, we can put it out."

"Keep your thin skirts out of the fire!" thundered Ray.

At this critical moment a woman's

figure panted up across the hollow; Joan saw that its hands and arms were loaded; they held a mop, two brooms, and a snow-shovel.

"Here I be!" cried Mary Caroline.

With her big arms and big hands she fell mightily upon the burning garden. Mary Caroline fought that fire as if she had been cleaning house or digging paths. She swept it, she scrubbed it, she mopped it, she beat it, she shoveled it. She uttered short, sharp sounds, neither language nor music, like those of sailors hurling anchor or furling sails. Martin Luther tried to help her, vociferating profanely, and retreated altogether like the coward collie that he was when he burned his tail. Suddenly the dog's whine changed into a violent, anxious bark, and all the

collie sense of responsibility returned proudly to him.

The smarting eyes of the three fire-fighters followed the motions of the dog, who was now dashing desperately from the garden to the grove and back again.

"It's no use!" cried Ray, running hatless through the smoke. "It 's got beyond us! We must have help! The grove is on fire!"

Before the words had left his lips, a small, sharp petal of flame looking like "a crocus in the shade" sprang from the dry grass within ten feet of the house. The fire-fighters had no time to study the map of the conflagration, and had not followed the course of a tiny root of fire which had been running unnoticed between the spiræa bush and the hot, yellow blossom on the grass.

Ray, scarcely comprehending the significance of this new danger, nevertheless turned his attention for a moment to it, and Joan saw that he was trying to stamp out the briskly burning grass, where the crocus of flame had now multiplied into a parterre. She saw that he stooped and examined the spot, glanced about him, and picked something up. She was at his side in a moment.

"Give it to me," she commanded.

"I will take care of it," said Ray.

"Please give it to me," insisted Joan.

Without a word he put into her hand the stump of a half-burned cigar.

The wind had now risen alarmingly, and the fire with it. It seemed to Joan that she had but looked, and the tapestry of pine needles in the grove was

ablaze from the garden to the hollow. It seemed to her that she but turned, and the place was alive with people. The solitary woman felt the intrusion of human life upon her privacy with a pang sharper than that of fear for her endangered home.

Neighbors were there from the surrounding homes, passers from the streets; children and men, a few women; the police; and other neighbors still—a phantasmagoria of interference with her isolation which filled her with incommunicable horror; as if the well-meaning people who had thronged her premises had been the spectres of delirium.

In one of these apparitions she perceived the figure of the Reverend Eliakim Cotton, crimson to his hair, as all fire-fighters are. The circumstance

that his hair was gray seemed to heighten the color of his face. He was bringing water from somewhere in pails. His wife was taking books out from the library, and Annie Hammerton was helping her.

The furnace man who said that character was more precious than rubies was trying to open the rusty piazza stop-cock which he had handled so many times. The junior deacon (who lived a few doors down the street) came running around the house with a hand grenade. Through the asphyxiating smoke Joan perceived Mary Caroline helping the furnace man to drag seventy feet of hose out of the cellar. The quiet voice of Douglas Ray, raised, but perfectly controlled, dominated the unorganized good-will of the thickening crowd.

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JOAN PERCEIVED MARY CAROLINE HELPING THE FURNACE MAN DRAG ONE HUNDRED FEET OF HOSE OUT OF THE CELLAR

"It can't be helped," he said, "we must have the Department."

A small boy came running around the corner of the house. As he ran he shouted: —

"Here they be! Here's the chemical! The ingine's comin'. So 's the hook and ladder!"

Joan tried to cry out, "Douglas! Douglas! Can't we do without *that?*" but before her dry lips could frame the words, the place was swarming with firemen.

The grove was now a lake of fire whose waves had begun to rise and splash. Ivy vines on dead, dry oaks curled and scorched. One could see the outlines of leaves like burning embroidery blaze and fall off. The lowest boughs of the tallest pines began to wince and shrivel. It was as if the

trees threw up their arms and cried for mercy. When the power of the water fell upon them they seemed to weep for joy. Joan's trees looked to her like sentient beings, saved from or doomed to a tragic death.

Douglas Ray appeared suddenly at her side.

"You had better go in now," he said quietly. "Leave everything to me. I think the worst is over."

As he spoke the words the violent autumn gale abruptly veered and set powerfully towards the house. Sparks licked the metallic paint of the shingles on the roof. Beautiful, blazing effects of leaves and twigs drove through the air and fell. The smouldering trouble in the grass flared up and crawled under the piazza.

"Look! Look! Look!" cried a

voice from the crowd. "The roof's catching!"

The firemen made a dash towards the house. Joan pushed in advance of them; Martin Luther ran ahead of her; she went in and shut the door.

CHAPTER VII

OUGLAS RAY dropped the scorched broom with which he had been beating grass, and ran into the house where Joan had disappeared. He entered as she had by the piazza; this was reached through a vestibule. He passed through the outer door, which he shut behind him, as Joan had done, and put his hand not very confidently upon the latch of the inner door. It was without actual surprise that he found this locked. He turned the knob noisily; he knocked loudly; he rang the bell authoritatively. Martin Luther's fierce

protest reverberated through the house. There was no other answer.

"Joan!" Ray called. "Let me in this minute!"

Joan did not reply.

There were old-fashioned side-lights at the door, and he tried to look through them. But his eyes stung with the smoke, which had irritated them so long, and which now filled the house as well as the grove; he could see nothing distinctly. Without a moment's hesitation he dashed the glass through with his foot, put his arm in, and drew the bolt. In doing this he cut his hand. When he had thrust open the door, and let himself in, and locked the door again as Joan had left it, he stood for a moment in the hall, uncertain. Joan was nowhere to be seen. The house choked with smoke. The firemen's

orders, the shouts of the crowd, the hissing sound of water on the roof, the roar of the fire in the grove, and the rage of the unappeasable wind made a jargon in which he could scarcely hear his own voice.

"Joan!" he repeated, "Joan, come down!"

He went through the long hall and took a step or two up the front stairs. "Come down," he pleaded; "if you will, I won't come up."

But Joan remained silent. Ray now perceived what in the excitement of the moment he had entirely overlooked, that the front door was ajar, and some one was in the library — the two ladies, Mrs. Cotton and Mrs. Hammerton, who, with the passion of people at a fire to do the wrong thing, were assiduously removing the books.

"I would n't do that," said Ray. "It is not in the least necessary. The house is not on fire; only a few scorched shingles and a post under the porch. It will be under control very soon. Those books will get wet and muddy. I don't think Miss Dare wishes them disturbed — not yet."

The two women yielded readily to the masterful, masculine manner which took them in hand.

"Shall I bring back the books that we have carried out?" asked Mrs. Cotton.

"Oh, no," returned Ray quickly. "Let them be till we see what happens. If you ladies feel inclined to oversee Mary Caroline a little — she may need advice at her end."

Smiling, he shut the door upon the visitors, and locked it hard.

"They have gone, Joan," he called. He ran halfway up the stairs.

A slight motion in the upper hall replied to him, and looking up through the smoke he saw a fold of Joan's gray gown blown around the banister at the top of the stairs. She did not present herself within the range of his eyes.

"What are you going to do?" he asked quietly.

"I am going to stay."

"Stay where?"

"Here — upstairs, where I am. I am not going to come down. You are not coming up."

"Better I than the firemen," suggested Ray.

"Nobody is coming up."

"The Department doesn't take a woman's 'no!' for an answer, Joan. Nor do I."

"If you come up any further," said Joan in a low, vibrant voice, "I shall lock myself into the sewing-room."

"If you do, I shall break the door in."

To this Joan made no response.

"Come!" pleaded Ray more gently. "Tell me! What is it that you *want* to do? Go down with the house? or suffocate there in this infernal smoke?"

"If it comes to that," replied Joan. — "Yes, if I am forced to that."

"She is capable of it," thought Ray. "She would die game. But she will not tell."

"Joan," he began in a different tone, "be reasonable. I will not come up, but you must come down. The house is not going to burn — at least I don't think so. If it does, I will give you plenty of notice. I have turned every-

body out of this end, and Mary Caroline is looking after the other. I want you to come down and speak to me."

Ray stood halfway up the stairs, hatless, dripping, muddy, and torn. The face of the fire-fighter was dull, purplish crimson, as if its shadows had been painted from a palette of blues. There was blood upon his clothes, and on his right hand. Joan stirred a step or two and saw him.

"Oh!" she cried. "You are bleeding! You are hurt!" She melted down the stairs and caught his wounded hand. Through the smoke he saw her lifted face, her yielding attitude — very woman of very woman, as he had called her once.

Infinite tenderness touched him through her fingers; low, passionate exclamations formed, it seemed, uncon-

sciously to herself upon her lips. She searched for her handkerchief, but could not find it, and so tore off a ruffle from her lawn waist and dexterously bound the wound. When she had done so, without a word she laid her cheek upon it.

"Joan," said Ray, "would you marry me now?"

"Dear Douglas, no."

"Not if the house burns down?"

"I told you what I should do if the house burns down."

"You are too much of a woman to talk like that," said Ray impatiently. "Every fireman in Mapleleaf would be in every room in this house. If they did n't, I should. You would be carried out like a sofa pillow."

"But you said," replied Joan, "that the house was n't going to burn down."

"It is n't. . . . *Now* will you marry me?"

But Joan shook her heavy head.

At this moment a fireman on the piazza roof called to some one below: —

"Guess we 've got to the end of this! Anyways, if everything 's right inside."

"Joan," said Ray abruptly, "let me pass, please. I must get up into the second story and examine that roof. If I don't, somebody else will."

"I cannot allow it!" cried Joan.

"I don't ask you to," replied Ray quietly. Gently putting aside her deterring hands, he passed her and ran up into the attic. He was gone but a few minutes, and, glancing neither to the right nor to the left, he ran quickly

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SHE DEXTEROUSLY BOUND THE WOUND

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down again; he passed the closed doors of Joan's house as if the sword of Paradise and exile had whirled before them.

"There!" he said. "That 's done."

A glint of admiration like the gold spark in the heart of a brown pansy burned in Joan's soft eyes. She did not speak.

The smoking grove was writhing still, for the wind had not gone down. But the lake of fire at the foot of the trees had become a pond of muddy water. Burning embroidery of leaves and vines had ceased to fall, tattered and glittering, through the air. The oaks held up black, dripping arms, and the fingers of the pines were drenched. The spiræa that had wrought the mischief was drowned and broken in every

slender bone; the salvia and the nasturtiums were trampled into mud. The sparks had now scattered like a flock of bright birds driven to flight. The little blaze under the piazza was out. Plenty of shingles were burned, but the soaked roof had ceased to smoke. The drenched house was saved.

At the kitchen door Mary Caroline, sleeves rolled to her broad shoulders, soot and water and mud splashed upon her white apron, her high cheek bones Indian red, her honest eyes dark with excitement, stood dispensing hospitality and defying entrance to the crowd.

"The lemonade to the firemen first," said Mary Caroline, "and the boys can have what 's left over. I guess there 's enough for the whole o' yer. If I 'd expected such a party, I 'd a' beat up a cake and had sandwiches. But you see

it 's a surprise party and I warn't ready. There 's ladies here to help me," observed Mary Caroline, importantly. "They 're makin' coffee. Miss Dare says for the firemen to cool off on the lemonade first. She is much obleeged to you, gentlemen, very much indeed, and so be I."

One of the firemen came up and took the pail of lemonade. He saluted respectfully as he said, "We was n't expecting to see you here, Miss. Folks said you got through some time ago."

"They did, did they?" cried Mary Caroline scornfully. "Well, you just tell 'em *here I be*."

The Chief of the Fire Department of Mapleleaf came around like a caller to the front door, and lifted the fate with the bit in its mouth to knock.

He was surprised to find that the door was locked; that which opened on the piazza he had already tried; the windows were fast; he had found it a species of discourtesy to force his way by Mary Caroline after accepting her lemonade and coffee. The Chief felt that his official prerogative was not recognized, and when Douglas Ray, with Martin Luther roaring behind him, opened the front door, the man pushed in officiously.

"The fire is over," quickly said Ray.

"The fire is over to all appearance," replied the Chief, "but I prefer to make quite sure of it. I should like to see the inside of the house."

"I have already done that," answered Douglas Ray, with a pleasant smile. "I have examined the house myself. I am confident that there is n't a spark

left in it. You will excuse me, but Miss Dare is very tired with all this, and I should like to keep the premises as quiet as I can for her.

"I have assumed the responsibilities of the occasion," added Ray deliberately and distinctly, "as the lady is to become my wife."

The Chief touched his helmet and withdrew. Ray shut the door again, and turned about with his Scotch expression.

"Oh, what did you say that for?" cried Joan from the upper landing.

"Because it 's true," replied Douglas Ray.

"It will be — why, it will be all over town by night!"

"I meant it should be."

"But everybody will hear it! Everybody will know it!"

"I hope everybody will."

"It will make everything worse!" urged Joan.

"It will make everything better," urged Ray.

The two fire-fighters regarded each other like duelists across the height and width of the stairs. Smoked and torn and crimson, the woman looked down. Muddy and black and bleeding, the man looked up.

"I shall never see her look *less* attractive," he thought; his heart leaped because he loved her so much when she was not beautiful.

"He looks as if he had been in a battle," thought Joan. But she knew that she loved him the more for that.

"The crowd is breaking up," said Ray hastily. "The chemical has gone; the rest are going. I hear Mrs. Cotton

and Mrs. Hammerton in the dining-room. Mary Caroline can't keep them back any longer. You'd better be on hand, Joan."

Joan came down the stairs, and went to meet her old friends. She was now quite self-possessed.

CHAPTER VIII

HE winter set in bitterly. It was colder than the last, and Joan, in her solitary home, found the practical perplexities of daily life more rather than less severe. There was a great deal of snow, and Mapleleaf took her share of it. The avenue was often closed, and the scorched grove stood knee-deep in blue-white drifts, or glittered to the brows with chain armor of gray-white ice. From the unaccepted street to Miss Dare's house, a steady foot-path ran across the hollow the winter long. No blizzard blockaded Mary Caroline. She waded through seas of slush and

water as merrily as if she had been mopping a kitchen floor. Mary Caroline wore rubber boots, and the golf-cape whose pointed hood rose like a Gothic arch from head bent to wind or storm. Her strong figure had the rude picturesqueness of a Millet peasant contending with a climate that Millet never knew.

Often, in the freezing dawn, Joan would hear the *chug!* of a snow-shovel underneath her window, and looking out, would surprise the strong figure of her old woman-servant manfully digging out paths.

One morning she opened the window and said:—

"Mary Caroline, this must stop. It is not fit work for you. I cannot have it."

"Well, I supposed you 'd say so,"

answered Mary Caroline, resting on her wooden shovel. "I 've engaged a man to do it."

She mentioned the name of the furnace man whose family had always had character.

"I 've give him the paths an' ash barrels," proceeded Mary Caroline calmly. "I have swore him not to come into the house. I told him you was a-trainin' some pet alligators you 'd had sent you from Floridy an' you was afraid they 'd bite somebody."

"He believed you, of course!" replied Miss Dare bitterly.

"Land!" said Mary Caroline. "He'd believe anything I told him. He 's ben some considerable sweet on me for quite a spell."

With these alleviations of her lot, Joan

continued her solitary and inexplicable life. The village had now accepted the mystery if not the pathos of it, and the definite disapproval of her fellow townsmen had ceased to express itself to her.

This fact, of course, in no wise impeded the current of public criticism. Like a subterranean river it ran on beneath her.

Chance words and petty incidents, dropped into the vortex, went whirling like garbage down that invisible stream. People discussed her life in all its known and unknown particulars. The village mystery which had now become common property was put to a painful exercise. The family history was recalled. Its details were torn from the merciful silence of many years. The bereavements, the cares, the tragedies which had befallen the household of Josiah

Dare, long half-forgotten, were now remembered. It was recollected that the family had moved out of the state for a time, and that Joan Dare had lived for at least three years during her first youth in some distant city — Chicago or New York.

Around this circumstance the gossip of the neighborhood concentrated. It was felt that anybody who *could* absent herself from Mapleleaf for a matter of years, might, in the nature of things, be capable of an extraordinary personal record. It was understood that in Chicago or New York the standards of life were unfortunately not always identical with those of the church and society of Mapleleaf. In these remote and abandoned places plainly anything might occur.

Who knew what had happened, in

her regrettable absence from the most desirable suburb in the world, to the daughter of Josiah Dare? The eccentricities of the family were exhumed; their misfortunes were recalled with a shake of the head or a droop of the eyelid. Who could say that there was not an unhappy tendency in the blood? It might take this form; it might choose that. Really, now that one came to consider it, who knew what dark scenes might have passed over the stage of Joan Dare's once troubled experience?

The architect, when these scandals reached him, set his teeth, but said no word. What could he do? What might he say? Any step that he took in her direction, every excuse that he offered for her sake, might drag her deeper into the underground river of the com-

mon talk. He was in the position, of all most intolerable to a lover, when a man cannot shield a woman without multiplying the very pangs from which he would protect her.

After the fire they had resumed their old relations. His masculine persistence had not dominated her in the least. She had not conceded by the flutter of an eyelash to his entreaties. In fact, he thought she distanced him more successfully than ever. She had reëntered the desolation of her life, and beyond the boundaries of that desert he stood and watched her with a helpless — it was in fact becoming a hopeless — misery. He had reached the pass where he acknowledged to himself that he could do absolutely nothing for her.

The spring was like the winter,

and the summer as the spring. The Scotchman bided his time patiently. When Joan consented to see him his heart lifted. When she rebuffed him it stood still, but did not fall. He bore with her distance, her dejection, and always with the perplexing nature of her position, with a gentleness such as most men despise, and only a few women possess.

He had ceased to make any attempt to visit her in the evening — a circumstance to which neither alluded — but had fallen into the way of trying to obtain a few words with her on Saturday afternoons. Sometimes he succeeded; then for weeks he was not admitted. As the summer advanced she refused more and more often to see him and, in fact, it was noticed by the neighbors that she was less and less to be met

about the streets of Mapleleaf. This was perhaps partly to be explained by the fact that a telephone, at that time a novelty in the village, had been installed in her house, and carried her necessary communications to the tradespeople of the town. Shortly after this was done, Ray caused an instrument to be set up in his own chambers. He took occasion to let her know that he had done so, but did not intrude upon her seclusion with the use of the wire.

"She would take the receiver off," he thought, "as soon as she found out that she could."

By July, Joan had ceased to admit Ray to the house at all, and only the woman-servant ever saw her. In August Mary Caroline was denied this precious privilege. One day Miss Dare

had spoken to her from the window and gently said: —

"I will send for you, Mary Caroline, when I want you next."

It had been a hot summer, and the fires of the south wind burned into September — the month of physical weakness and stealthy disorders — the month when typhoid, and tuberculosis, and malaria have the upper hand in their eternal wrestle with human life.

One warm, weak morning, at the first stir of the dawn, Joan came downstairs. She was fully though hastily dressed, but whether by accident or intent had avoided her customary gray habit. Her face had a startling whiteness, and seemed to be a part of her long cream-white woolen gown, as if both had been carved from the same

piece of Carrara. She went directly to the laundry, thrust up the shade, and flung open the window. Across the sill she hung the kitchen tablecloth, shut the window down upon it, and left the red signal flaring against the house. She seemed not to know what to do next, and sat down in the kitchen confusedly.

The collie was asleep in the cellar, and she was alone in the house, whose unnatural silence appeared to terrify her. Suddenly she grew a little faint or sick, and her face fell into her hands upon the kitchen table.

The key snapped in the lock, and resounding steps struck the floor. Two strong arms inclosed her, and she found her heavy head upon a woman's bosom.

"Here I be," said Mary Caroline. "I run all the way. What is it, dearie?

Oh, what is it, dearie? Ain't yer goin' to tell Mary Caroline?"

"Yes," said Joan, in a thrilling voice, "I am going to tell you, Mary Caroline, — you first; you before everybody, you before anybody in the world." As if she feared that the deaf house should hear, or the sleeping world might listen, she whispered a few broken sentences into Mary Caroline's smitten ear.

Across the old servant's face horror, incredulity, pity, and a passion of adoring love raced with sheer mental inability to overtake the meaning of the language which she had heard.

"It's ompossible!" she cried, "you're starin' crazy. I'd orter had one of them nervous doctors to you two years ago."

"Go up," pleaded Miss Dare, "go

upstairs and see for yourself — I don't know — perhaps you can tell me what to do. It is three nights since I 've slept. I can't think as I ought to. I"—

"The Lord o' miseries and miracles have mercy on ye!" moaned Mary Caroline, "ye pore creetur! Ye pore misfortinit, sufferin' creetur! Oh, my dear, my dear!"

"Do not wait, Mary Caroline," entreated Joan. "Go up — please. You 're not afraid, are you? I think perhaps I am."

"You come along of me," commanded Mary Caroline slowly. "You lay down on the sofy and lemme cover you. See, here 's brandy. Ye 've kep' it on the second shelf same 's as I did, hain't ye? There! Soon 's ye drawr a breath, I 'll go. I won't go a step be-

fore — There, my lamb, there, my lamb! *Here I be!*"

Joan, on the library lounge, lay quite still. She felt a storm of tears upon her fainting face. A big and brooding figure knelt beside her. Kisses covered her thin hands. She heard broken phrases — "Lambs!" and "Dearies!" and "Pore creeturs!" — crushed between great sobs.

Then Mary Caroline heavily went upstairs. The fall of her slow feet reverberated through the empty house, crossed the upper hall, entered a closed room, and paused.

When Mary Caroline came down (she had been gone some little time) she found Miss Dare standing at the telephone in the hall. She was speaking rapidly and clearly. Mary Caro-

line's awed face leaned over the banister.

"Is Mr. Ray in?"

. . . . . .

"Are you Mr. Ray?"

. . . . . .

"Douglas, is that you? This is Joan Dare."

. . . . . .

"Douglas, will you come over? At once, if you please. I need help—Yes, I need *you*."

. . . . . .

When Ray got there, she was quite composed. Their eyes met—his with a cruel anxiety, hers with a solemn light.

"Come," she said.

She extended her hand; he took it; and without any other word she led him up the stairs.

They crossed the front hall, still silently, and Joan led him to a closed room on the rear of the house. At the door she paused.

"Don't be startled," she said. "It 's the least of human miseries. It is only Death."

She had a strange, remote smile. He tried to read it, but felt that he could not, as she drew him on.

"Shall I open the door?" he asked, for he saw that she shrank on the threshold.

"If you would!" She shuddered. There was a key in the outside of the lock. He turned it, and they entered the room together, still hand in hand.

The room was small, but it had two windows; these were open, and the blinds were closed. The broadening

day was barred from the darkened spot, and they could at first see nothing distinctly except the position of the bed. This was drawn out between the windows as if to secure for it a current of air. A body, plainly by its height that of a man, lay upon this bed. It was covered with a sheet and light counterpane. Mary Caroline, it seemed, had performed the last offices, and everything was decent and orderly about the dead and in the room. Joan stepped to the bedside, and uncovered the face. She and Ray had remained hand in hand, but now his fingers unclasped slowly, and hers slid from them.

"Who is this man?" he demanded. The words stirred slowly from his white lips; they had the sluggish movement of a glacier beginning to form and stiffen.

"I suppose," he said, "it is your husband."

Joan, when he let go her hand, had hidden her face with it.

"You ought to have told me," said Douglas Ray.

CHAPTER IX

O," said Joan, "I have no husband."

"And never had?" demanded Ray sternly. His manner was the more dreadful because it superseded a sacred tenderness in which a woman might have perished because she died of joy.

"Nor ever had," repeated Joan.

For the width of an instant, far in the Scotchman's eyes there arose the altar of an anguish so solemn that his whole being seemed to be flung, a sacrifice consumed, upon it.

Joan uttered an inarticulate sound.

"Douglas! Douglas!" she cried. "Don't you see? Don't you know? Have you never suspected — all the while?"

"I see nothing. I know nothing. How could I suspect — you?" he answered drearily. He replaced the sheet over the dead man's face and turned away.

"I have trusted you, Joan," he said.

"When no other man would!" Joan lifted her head. "No other that I ever knew — I have been so proud of you! — Oh, I have gone on the knees of my heart to worship you, Douglas Ray! And now, just because it is so hard to speak — because I have got to feeling for so long that I *can't* speak — Douglas! Why, Douglas!"

With incredible difficulty, as if the power to enunciate them had been torn

out of her throat and mouth, Joan uttered four half-strangled words.

. . . . . .

"But I thought you had no brother, except that one,—you told me there was only one!"

"There was only one."

"And he is dead," argued Ray dogmatically.

"Yes," said Joan, "he is dead. He died this morning in my arms. There he lies."

She pointed to the long figure on the bed—her knees gave way beneath her like broken hinges, and she slid down slowly to the floor. Before Ray could stoop to gather her she had laid her lips upon his foot.

"You trusted me! You trusted me!" she sobbed.

"Oh, come!" cried Douglas Ray,

"I can't have that. Change places with me, Joan."

He stooped and lifted her to her feet, and would have knelt before her, but she could not stand upon them. So he took her in his arms instead.

"We will get out of this room," he urged, "and then you shall tell me all about it."

He lifted her as if she had been a woman figure escaping him or clinging to him in a beautiful, stormy dream, and carried her into the hall. There they found Mary Caroline, herself white to her Indian cheek bones.

"It 's him!" she cried; "it 's him, himself. It 's Harum Dare. I 've give him cookies and sponged his close too many times not to know him, Mr. Ray. It 's Harum Scarum, no mistake. He 's changed something dreadful; but then,"

added Mary Caroline grimly, "so has she."

"Go down, Mary Caroline," commanded Ray, "and telephone for the medical examiner; or, no — stay. You need not, on the whole. I will do it myself. I must have the full facts, Joan, before he gets here."

"There 's a lounge over at that there window," suggested Mary Caroline anxiously; "it' s Martin Luther's, most gener'lly speakin', but she's pretty consid'ble heft for you to take downstairs, and I ain't er goin' ter have her walkin' 'round till I 've give her some breakfast. She ain't slep' enough to keep the life in the wings of a broodin' bird. She 's been a misfortunit, disluded creetur too long, Mr. Ray, and don't you forget it. Now she 's clean gin out."

Obediently Ray did as the old ser-

vant directed. Suddenly Mary Caroline seemed to have taken command of the whole situation, and the governing class deferred to her as a matter of course. Ray put Joan on the lounge, by the hall window, and sat down beside her. It was a cretonne-covered lounge, white, with large roses. He fastened his eyes upon one of the roses, a crimson one, which peered above the shoulder of Joan's white dress. While she was trying to speak, he did not watch her face, but he took her thin hand and held it strongly.

"Have you never heard," began Joan, without looking at him, — "about it?"

"People don't gossip to me," replied Ray scornfully. "I knew there was a tragedy of some sort. I never heard its details; I never wanted to. Everybody

believed that the boy was dead, and so did I. And so "—

"And so did I," repeated Joan. "I believed as everybody believed till — that night" —

"Go on," said Ray.

For she had paused in pitiable agitation.

"He killed a man," she said with sharp distinctness. "He was tried, and convicted, and condemned. He would have been — they would have hung him. It was in New York. He was in Sing Sing. They took out bricks and dug their way out — you know how prisoners do. There were two of them, and the other was what people call a gentleman too. I think he murdered a woman, and he meant to do it. It was different with Harum. He did n't *mean* to do any harm," she urged

earnestly. "He had been drinking. It was a quarrel, and it — it happened. Harum was a kind boy, Douglas. He was always bringing home starved kittens, and tormented dogs. I have seen him go out of his way rather than step on a spider or some little crawling thing that anybody else would crush. He was a dear fellow. I loved my little brother."

Ray lifted the hand which he held, and laid his cheek upon it. He did not speak. Joan's faltering voice went on:

"So they dug their way out of the prison, as I tell you"—

"Yes, I read of such a case last week," interrupted Ray.

"And they got to the water, and they were chased, and they jumped in. One swam away — it was dark, and he escaped — but one was drowned. It was

three weeks before they found the body, and they said, — and they thought — everybody thought — they were sure — it was Harum that they found, and there was a lead pencil in his pocket with the name carved on it with a jack-knife — '*H. S. Dare.*' And there were some other reasons, but I forget them all. So Father took him and buried him, for he was allowed to do it. That was up in the country, in New York, in grandmother Scairn's old lot, and everybody knew that he was dead. He had been dead for eleven years, when he —

"So we came back here to live, and then Father and Mother died, and there was only Mary Caroline and I and Martin Luther. I was beginning to learn how to bear it" — Joan's voice wavered, "I was beginning to think I

might be happy like other women, after all. I had begun to love — you. I had said I would be your wife."

"You will be," interrupted the Scotchman, "before you are many hours older."

Joan allowed herself the symbol of a smile as she made a little gesture of disagreement; it was as if she had rejected him so long that her denial went on automatically; her heart seemed to have stiffened, as a muscle does that has been clenched too hard and steadily; she shook her head; her cheek turned against the crimson cretonne rose that expressed her pallor. She seemed now, Ray thought, as anxious as she had been at first reluctant to go on talking. She had begun afresh, when cantering footfalls pounded up the stairs, and Martin Luther leaped and laid his head, in the

collie fashion, upon her lap. Joan's wasted fingers fell upon the dog's ears.

"*He's* stood by me," she said pathetically. Ray watched her slowly caressing hand.

"Such tenderness!" he thought, "such tenderness! Most women don't know how to spell a syllable of it. She could put them all in the primer class and teach them — if they had enough of it to let her."

But Martin Luther was followed by Mary Caroline with coffee which she put to Miss Dare's lips. Joan and Ray sipped a little to please Mary Caroline, but neither could eat, and Mary Caroline went away. Joan now sat up against the cretonne pillow, and with firmer voice began again: –

"Harum was such a dear little fel-

low, Douglas — you can't think. You can't understand how it all was — how I felt, how we all felt about Harum. Father was worse than any of us. He spoiled the boy; from the beginning of everything Harum had his way; he did as he pleased; nobody stopped it, and so Mother used to worry about it; she understood better how it was; she and I used to talk about it. One night when I was just a girl at school, she came into my room after I had gone to bed, and said: 'Joan, I want you to promise me, no matter what should happen, *promise* me you will always look after your little brother;' for Harum is four years younger than I am, and he used to look up to me, you know, and tag after me at play, and I always took care of him, and it never used to seem to me as if he had grown up. He was a

mischievous little fellow, Douglas, full of fun, always up to something — and I was always getting him out of scrapes he'd got into. Don't you see?"

"I see," said Douglas. "Oh, I know! You don't need to tell me what *you* did — how *you'd* treat a wild boy."

"He *was* wild," admitted Joan, "but I promised Mother. And he never was anything worse until this — this dreadful thing. He didn't mean to do it, Douglas."

"They never do," thought Douglas; but he put her hand to his lips. Joan's low voice went stealing on, — idealizing, idolizing, forgiving; pardoning like God and condoning like herself — a woman "made of love" and "of love all worthy." She told him — it seemed that she could not tell him enough. Now that the gates of silence were un-

locked, the torrent of expression poured as if it would dash the dam of language down. She recalled old, forgotten episodes of the lad's college days — little things showing even to her exquisite sense of exculpation how and where the boy had first gone wrong; she dwelt on pretty incidents in his childhood; how he had done such a kind thing one day, or such another on the next; how lovable he was; what a handsome lad, a scholar too; such a brilliant fellow — and how they played together and studied together as long as they could, and about the letters that he wrote home, and how the neighbors called him Harum Scarum when he was a little fellow — and would get into trouble, do the best she could, poor boy! poor boy! But nobody thought that it would ever be *real* trouble like that

which happened in New York. Then her mind leaped over the tragedy and swung away from New York abruptly, and reverted suddenly to Mapleleaf, and to the night when the outcast had lifted and let fall the fate upon the threshold of her door.

"He had been wandering about," she pleaded, "God knows where — all those years. Harum never told me — he could not talk about it. It was like being the ghost of a lost soul; you cannot show yourself, you know. Nobody would want you, nobody would care. But he knew *I* would, so when he found out that he had consumption, Douglas — that he could not live — he came to me. He did not think it would last as long as it did; he only came home to die. He wanted so to be at home to die! He wanted *me* so, Douglas! So I

took him in; I did the best I could for Harum."

"Did he never know — did he not suspect, the price you paid for it?" asked Ray, — "the awful price."

"Oh, no," said Joan, "he was pretty sick; he did not think it through; I never told him *that*; I made light of things, I put it to him any way — but that."

She closed her eyes, and her head fell back upon the cretonne pillow, weakly. Impulses of speech and second thoughts of silence alternated on her quivering lips. For a while he did not intrude upon her by a word, but absolutely gave her will its way.

"Sometimes I had such frights," she whispered, "lest he should be found, lest people should come in. That fire was the worst of all — I

would have gone down with the house," she cried, "before I would have given him up!"

Ray started to say, "You could n't have, because I was there," but he forebore.

"Then it was so hard to see him suffer, to let him die that way, without proper care — no nurse, no doctor, nobody but me." She pressed her hollow eyes, as if she would shut out sights she must see as long as she lived. "But he would not have a doctor; he *could* not have one. I wanted our old doctor so — the one that Mother had, and Father. But of course, you see, it never would have done. Once I went into town and saw a specialist. I gave another name — not my own. I told him about the case; I told him the patient was eccentric, and refused to see a phy-

sician, and what did he advise me to do? He gave me a prescription, and he said there was n't anything to be done. He said the patient would die about the middle of September; and he has. — I see so many things I might have done differently," faltered Joan, "if I had it to do over again. But I tried, I did try to do the best I could for Harum. I had n't anybody to — to ask."

Now she began to sob again. Except that once when the minister and his wife had found her off her guard, it was two years since Joan had cried, and Ray did not try to check the dashing tears that wet her cheeks and his. Instead, he sat down upon the lounge and locked his arms about her.

"Here," he said, "you *stay*. Cry, lassie! Cry! It will do you good!

You great, royal woman soul! You poor — brave — noble girl!"

Their lips met solemnly. To Ray's came other words: he called her "heroine," "martyr," "soldier," "queen," and God knows what high names besides; he offered her a litany, half worship and all love. Joan received it gently.

He left her presently and went downstairs; she heard him talking at the telephone, and with Mary Caroline. Both moved about the house; doors shut and opened; bells rang, and the knocker on the front door fell three times, but Joan lay with her hands upon her eyes and her grief upon her heart; she neither heard, nor saw, nor cared, what happened. It seemed to her that anything might happen now, and then that nothing could.

When Ray came back with strangers and took them into the dead man's room, she asked no questions and felt no concern. When he came out of the room and went downstairs and hurried up again, she did not stir; he sat down on the lounge beside her, and drew something from his inner pocket — unfolded it, and laid it on her lap.

"Martin Luther shan't get it *this* time!"

He smiled so happily that Joan smiled too—she could not help it. She saw now that she held for the second time in her trembling hands the marriage license, torn and worn from safe and sacred keeping against the Scotchman's heart.

"Joan," suggested Ray quite naturally, as if he were not asking anything of consequence, "Mr. Cotton is down-

stairs, and his wife is with him. He has come to marry us."

"Not *now*, Douglas?" Joan got to her feet. She looked this way and that about her. The door of her own room was open behind her. Ray saw it, shut it, and stood before it.

"You can't go there. You can't go *anywhere* — except here." He held out his arms.

"You have been the most wretched woman in the world, Joan. See! I'll make you the happiest. We have suffered enough, I think, don't you? Let us turn about and try joy for a change. I can't see any reason for waiting, — in fact," added the Scotchman, "I *won't* wait; I've done enough of that. Besides, there are things to be done yet; the situation needs a man. Indeed, it needs a husband; Mr. Cotton agrees with me

about that — not that it would make the least difference if nobody agreed with me. Come, Joan!"

"Very well," said Joan. She took a few steps towards him, but stopped.

"What will your mother say?" she asked. "There will always be poor Harum, and — the disgrace."

"What disgrace?" asked Ray.

CHAPTER X

JOAN stood in the library with the old minister and his wife and Mary Caroline. Footsteps were still stirring overhead, and Ray closed the door and turned the key.

"We are ready, sir," he said.

"I have n't any dress," pleaded Joan, with an embarrassed little smile.

Ray's eyes traveled up and down the clinging, trailing gown.

"Nothing could be whiter," he suggested.

Mary Caroline stepped up softly; she had a folded package in her hand; it

was wrapped in silk, which fell apart beneath the old servant's strong and reverent fingers.

"Here, my dear," said Mary Caroline. "You listen to me; don't you let him snarl this cat's cradle. He 's nothin' but men folks. He could n't understand; tain't in 'em. There ain't *no* woman wants to be married in her common cloes, nor never was—not if she 'd set the Last Trumpet for her weddin' day. Here 's your mother's veil, Miss Joan. It 's pretty old, and dreadful yellow, but there 's a good deal of it, and it was hern. I went upstairs and got it, for I thought she'd like to have me."

With a deft and unexpected motion, Mary Caroline shook out the lace, hung it over her mistress, and draped her with it from head to foot.

Softened and enhanced, Joan's haggard face looked pathetically through the illusion with which the custom of generations has blurred the eyes of a bride. Her mother's veil gave glamour to her; she had a spiritual beauty which youth, and a light heart, and freedom from care, and ignorance of suffering may never know. She seemed to float upon a silver cloud, and to sway as if uncertain whether to vanish or alight. The Scotchman gripped her hand; he felt as if she might melt away from him.

So her old minister married her and blessed her. But Mary Caroline kissed her through her mother's veil. Mary Caroline did not cry; she looked a little stupid, as if she had lost her way in a foreign land where she could not speak the language. She held out her big hand to Douglas Ray.

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"HERE'S YOUR MOTHER'S VEIL, MISS JOAN"

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" asked Mary Caroline in an oratorical tone, as if she were repeating an omitted part of the church service. "That 's me. There ain't no other mortal man I 'd want to have her. But I guess you 've earned her, Mr. Ray."

With solemn steps, as if she had been returning from some tomb where she had left the dearest thing she knew, Mary Caroline crossed the room, turned the key, and opened the door. But in the hall she stood still, and began to paw the air with sudden, sprawling fingers. It took Ray some moments to divine that these extraordinary gestures were intended as a signal for himself. He obeyed it at once, and Mary Caroline shut the door.

"Seein' you be her husband," said

Mary Caroline distinctly, "I suppose this here 's your business, not mine. I found it under his pillow when I come to lay him out. He 'd got his mother's Bible, and this was tucked between the leaves. You, see she 's so wore out, I thought you 'd better read it first. I don't feel as if I had n't orter, and I warn't er goin' ter bother *her*. Thanks be to mercy, she has bore enough."

Mary Caroline laid a folded note, unsealed, within Ray's outstretched hand. He read it in silence and without hesitation. Thus it ran:—

DEAR JOAN,—I want to be buried in the evening — if pretty dark, so much the better, and I don't want it put off. Don't draw out the misery — I 've made you trouble enough. Besides I don't think I shall begin to rest until

I am under ground. I am tired of the whole thing — of sinning, of suffering, of being. If I had my choice, I would never *be* again, but if I had to go living anywhere, I would try to be a different fellow. On my soul (if I have a soul) I would. Before God (if there is a God), I am sorry for everything. I am sorry all the way back, and as far as I can remember. I was thinking yesterday of the first lie I told, and how I took some money from you when I was a little chap. You never knew — you thought you lost it — it was all you had — two dollars and sixty cents. And you were such a generous little girl, you'd have given it to me if I had asked for it. The thing I mind most is disgracing *you* — Great God, Joan! What you have been! What you have done! I don't believe there 's another woman

in the world, not another sister, anyhow, who would have crucified herself as you have, and never cried out once — no, nor groaned. You thought I did n't know what it cost you; at first, you see, I did n't. I never would have come if I had seen the whole thing through. I 've been a bad man, but I never sunk so low as that. I would have died like the castaway I am, and I wish I had. But by the time I began to understand it was too late. I thought you 'd mind it less, if you thought I did n't know, so I let you think so. — All I can say now is, I hope I have died in time. You have grown terribly thin lately, and pale. You are like an ermine, Joan. You know the little creature will stand still and be killed before it will step in the mud. They are slandering you to death, and

you 've stood still and let them; they have hunted you almost down — these Christian men and women, God forgive them! — it 's more than I can do. — I wonder if you 'll miss me any in spite of all. There 's nobody else to. — People who have n't suffered or lived say, God bless you! I say, God make more women like you — if He can!

Love me a little when you are happy, and forgive your brother,

HARUM S. DARE.

Now it was the old minister's turn. Everything that tact and a pastor's heart could do was done for these two children of his parish — the dead lad and the slandered woman. He caused the word of what had happened to be carried everywhere, and half of Maple-leaf came to share in the last service

offered to the blotted memory of Harum Dare.

It was in the evening, as he had wished; it was not going to be a dark night, as he had hoped, for there was a high moon, and twilight and moonlight met with soft candle-light in the library where the boy lay: — going out of his father's house as if he had never dishonored it, and treated in it as he had always been, with patience, with tenderness, with trust, until the end.

Joan's neighbors and fellow-townsmen crept in with hanging heads. When they saw her — for she was still in her white dress, and Ray beside her — their first thought was that they had been bidden to one of the solemn ceremonies when love and death share the house, as love and death share life. But they soon saw how it was, and under-

stood that none of her old friends in Mapleleaf had been found worthy to be bidden to the marriage of Joan Dare.

Joan stood with lifted head. Once her haggard eyes swept the crowded room. In the arrow of that glance she had seen everything, she had recognized everybody — all these people who had misunderstood and wronged her. Their faces swayed before her like the phantoms of an after life. They seemed a great way off — farther than the boy in his coffin. The minister's wife was there; she had drawn her veil. Annie Hammerton sat beside her, sobbing. The old furnace man whose family always had character stood in the doorway, with a puzzled face. The church committee were in the room; they sat decorously and did not look

at Miss Dare. The junior deacon and the little clerk had moved up nearest her. The senior deacon held his hat before his face. The theological member and the rich member cast their eyes upon the floor. Some of the firemen were present, and the Chief in his uniform, cap in hand, and the ladies of the Wednesday Club with handkerchiefs at their faces. All of Joan's old neighbors had thronged to honor her. The house was full, and the press was great; the hall, the stairs, the steps overflowed, and the avenue was crowded to the street.

The church people were there, and the church choir, that sang as if it had been any one else's funeral; they sang the old burial hymns that everybody loves — "Lead, Kindly Light," and "Jesus, Lover of My Soul;" just as if

the dead lad had never disgraced his father's faith or his father's name.

Then the voice of the old minister uprose solemnly. He spoke with thrilling distinctness. The windows were open, and the people halfway down the avenue could hear what he said: –

"There was once a woman who has been called the greatest of her sex, who came from the obscurity of peasant ancestry and childhood to the front of a world-wide and immortal fame. She commanded men, she organized forces, she led armies, she generaled battles, she saved a nation. She will be remembered forever as the greatest woman warrior of the world.

"Peace has her battles as well as war; common life, like extra life, has its revolutions, its conflicts, its victories, its defeats; demands its leaders and finds

them. Village history has its heroines. Glory passes them by, but a fine soul cannot. A woman warrior stands among us, — unrecognized, misunderstood, hounded to her anguish and our shame.

"People of Mapleleaf! — where we should have trusted we have suspected. Where we should have lifted and comforted, we have crushed and derided. Where we should have believed in a spotless character, we have broken a noble heart. This poor lad, whom we are met to carry from his father's house below to the gates of his Father's house above, was a lesser criminal, I think, than we have been. He only killed a man; we have murdered a character; he slew a human life; we have slain a woman's name; his was the deed of a moment's madness; ours has been the deliberate action of years;

he slaughtered; we have tortured; he has suffered; we have inflicted; he has gone to the mercy of his Heavenly Father's heart, a repenting and forgiven soul. His share in this great tragedy has been expiated. Ours is yet unreckoned."

Then the minister, who had never been afraid of his people, who was accustomed to speak the truth to them, no matter where it hit nor whom it hurt, advanced and laid his hands upon the dead man's head, and kept them there a moment, as if he blessed the wanderer. Who knows what sacred and sad-hearted responsibility he had felt for the self-willed boy, whom his pastor had never been able to control? In an awed and trembling voice, the minister began to pray:—

"Great God, Thou who art the hope

of every sorry sinner, in Christ's name, and for Christ's sake, we intrust this erring soul to Thee. Take him to Thyself and hold him there. We are content to lay him on Thy heart. Just and merciful God, Thou receivest the dead, but in our keeping are left the treasures of life. Make us worthy of our sister, whom we have sorely wronged! Lord, forgive our sins! We have not meant to be as cruel as we were; perhaps we have been more stupid than wicked in Thy sight; but Lord, forgive our sin! If ever from this day we shall speak the word that wrongs, remind us of this hour. If ever our thoughtless lips should scatter the slander that slays — Lord, remind us of this hour, and of this prayer."

When the old pastor's voice had ceased from prayer the poor lad's neigh-

bors came up one by one to look upon his face, and went their ways and thought their own thoughts, and told no man what these were, for their eyes were downcast, and some, it was noticed, walked with heads upon their breasts.

So Joan and her husband and her old servant buried their dead, and all the people followed them. It was far on in the evening, and the moon was high; it stood in the sky as if it had been built into the walls of the city whose gates were each a pearl; one felt as if something had been opened and let heaven down. Joan's exalted face, wasted well-nigh as much as that other which was covered now from sight beneath September leaves and flowers, lifted unconsciously with the battle attitude, like that of the woman warrior

to whom the minister had likened her. She seemed to be reviewing invisible forces; she seemed to hear inaudible voices; it was as if she still stood apart from all the world. She took her hand from her husband's arm, and knelt beside the open grave, and covered her face. But on that solitary moment no man, not even he who loved her best, intruded.

Afterwards, she made it known to him that she wished to remain, they two alone together, until the sods had been laid upon the poor lad. And it was done, as she had asked, and every one went away and left her so. She busied herself with the flowers, and did not speak. She stayed some time. When she rode back with her husband, and came to the doorway of her own house, she was surprised to see that people

were standing solemnly on this side of the avenue and on that.

The house was warmly lighted, and the shades were raised. On the upper step stood Mary Caroline, with Martin Luther; Mary Caroline was smiling quietly, but Martin Luther, who could not smile, but only love, came leaping down. The crape had been taken from the fate upon the door, and flowers, knotted with white, clung to the knocker. At a word from somebody the carriage was stopped without coming to the steps, and the two got out and walked a little way among the neighbors, not understanding why they did so. The old dog preceded them with dignity.

Joan, on her husband's arm, in her white dress, with the moonlight on her, came up between the lines of peo-

ple on this side and that, and wondered a little, but did not say so, — till suddenly she felt soft arms around her neck, and warm tears upon her cheek, and it seemed to be that Annie Hammerton was sobbing in her ear: "Forgive, forgive me, Joan!"

"Me, too," nobly said the pastor's wife, "I might have done so much! — I wish I had."

Before she could draw her agitated breath, Joan perceived that the women of Mapleleaf, her old neighbors, had come crowding up to ask her pardon, because they had misunderstood her. This touched her deeply, so much that she could not answer them. Then while she was trying to do so, she saw that her way was blocked by a group of men, who stood each with lifted hat and head bared to do her honor. It

surprised her to observe that she stood face to face with the committee of the village church.

They were all there, — the senior deacon, the junior deacon, the clerk, the theological member, and the rich member, — and they seemed to have received her in an official capacity, for the senior deacon was their chairman and their spokesman, and he it was who, with some difficulty and very slowly, said: —

"It is our judgment and belief" —

Joan's fingers tightened suddenly on her husband's arm.

"It is our judgment and belief" — repeated the senior deacon, "that when a Christian church does anything wrong, it ought to say so, like anybody else. Miss Dare, we made a mistake; we've come to ask your pardon

for it. We wish to say — in fact," proceeded the senior deacon, "we do say, that we consider you have reached a high plane of Grace" (grace was a favorite word with the senior deacon, though what he meant by it neither he nor anybody knew), "and we honor you for it, madam. We wish we had understood the circumstances all along; but we — well, we did n't. We thought we were doing right. We meant to, but we see we did n't. So we ask you to forgive us —for Christ's sake, Amen," added the deacon, as if he had been making a public prayer.

Then Joan, for Christ's sake, Amen, held out her thin hand to the deacon, and to the members of the church committee, and to her own neighbors, one by one. For her great heart was large enough to hold them all. A woman

who could love as she had loved would forgive as she forgave.

Joan looked from face to face. "You see," she said quite naturally, "I promised Mother I'd always take care of my little brother."

She entered her home with her husband, and all the house was still; it seemed dazzling bright, and pulsated before her. Every tragic sign had been removed, and Mary Caroline was getting supper as if nothing had happened.

The Morris chair was in its place before the library fire, which somebody had lighted. Douglas Ray led his wife across the room silently. With the capacity for happiness which only suffering gives, Joan entered the kingdom of joy. And so much greater a power is hope than despair that it seemed to her as if every pang which she had

known had evaded her memory, as it had retreated from her life. She tried to say so, but no words came.

Martin Luther jumped from the cretonne couch with the roses, sauntered downstairs, and looked in at the library door. When he saw what he saw, his ears went flat to his head, and he hurried out into the kitchen to report the circumstance to Mary Caroline. He found her serving supper with the professional aid of the furnace man who said that character was more precious than rubies.

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